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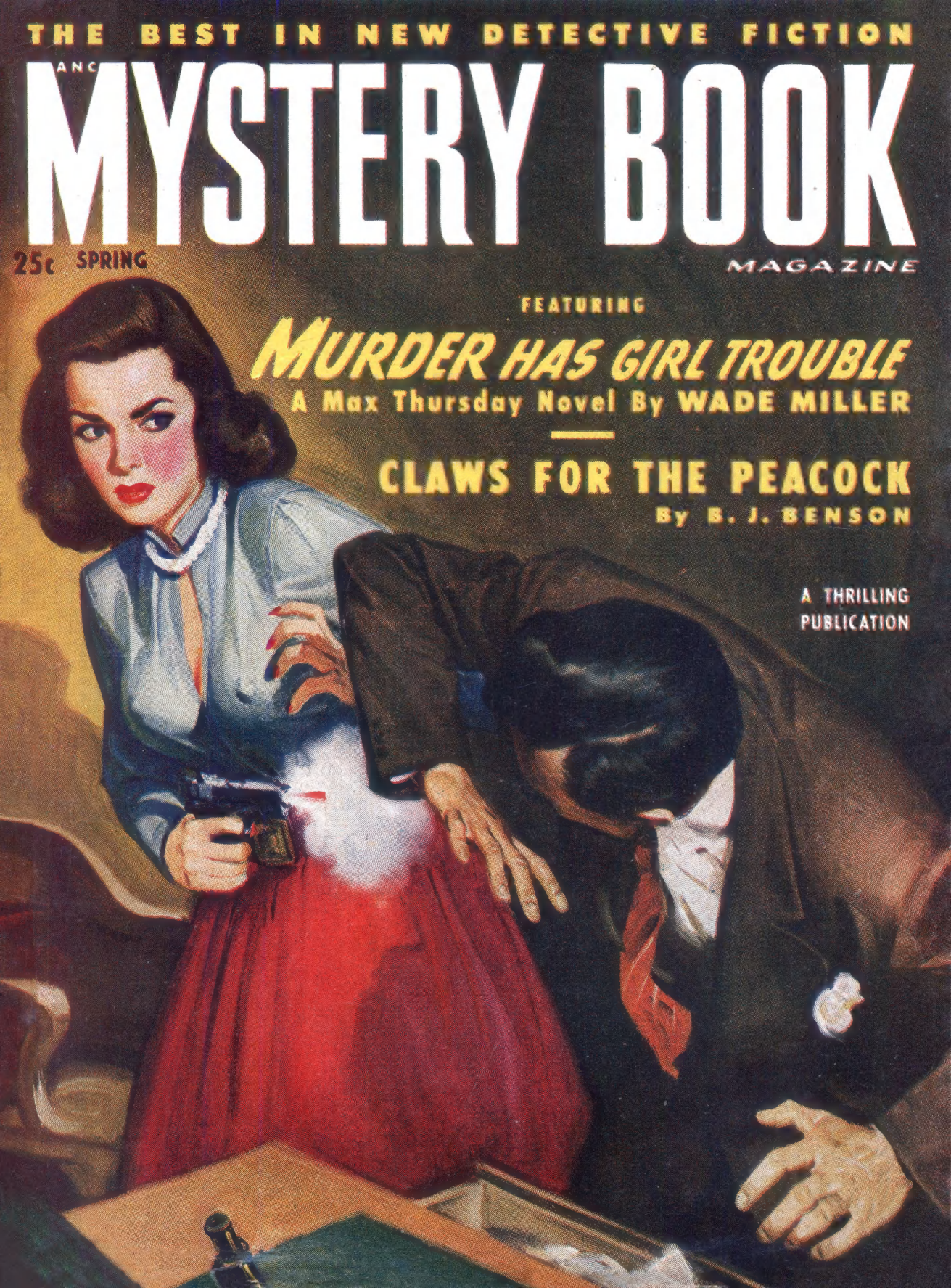

FEATURING

MURDER HAS GIRL TROUBLE

A Max Thursday Novel By WADE MILLER

CLAWS FOR THE PEACOCK

By B. J. BENSON

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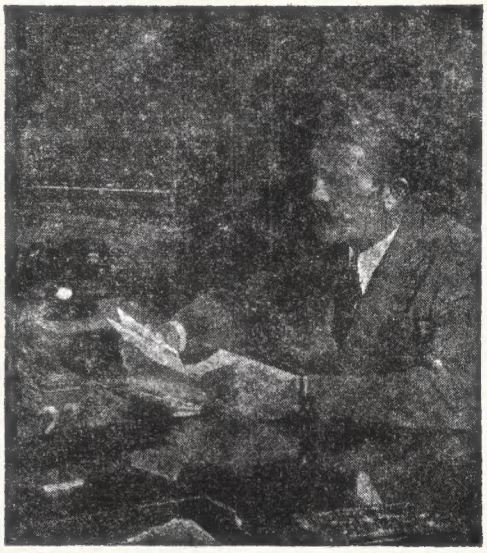

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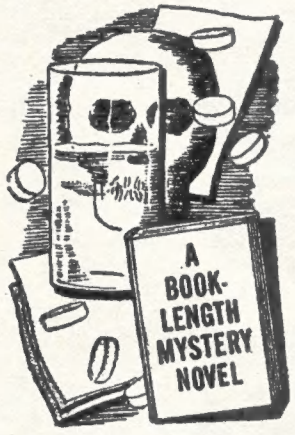
Vol. 9, No. 3 | A THRILLING PUBLICATION | Spring, 1950

A Complete Max Thursday Mystery



MURDER HAS GIRL TROUBLE

By
WADE MILLER

Max Thursday grabs a handful of glamour on the death-strewn trail of a wily blackmail combine—and mixes into a gang tangle that proves to be a crime-studded calamity fair! **11**

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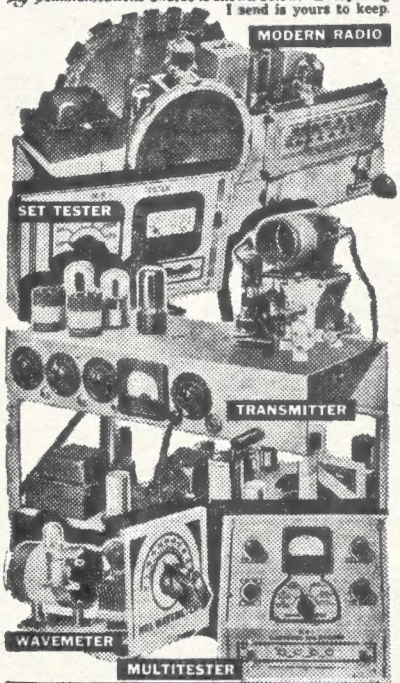

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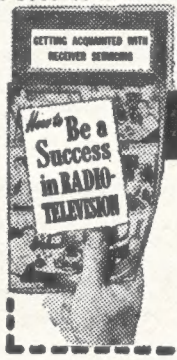

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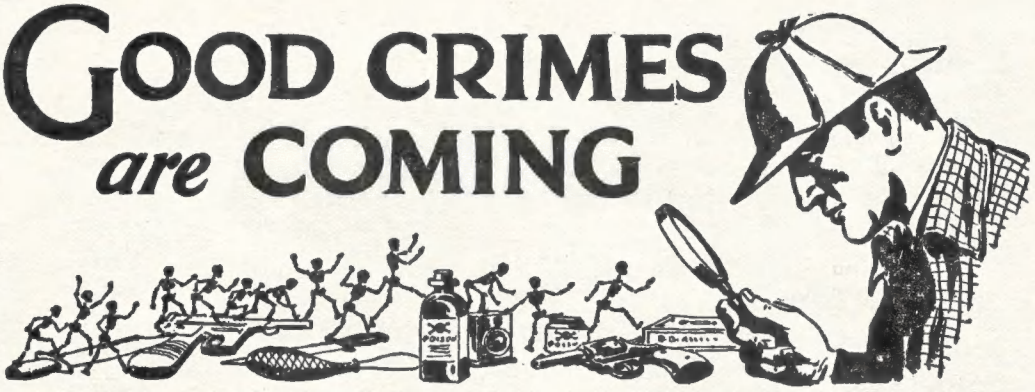


A Preview of Cases on the Calendar for Our Next Issue

HER body was unspeakably smooth and softly rounded, yet firmly and flawlessly molded. Her inscrutable young face, which told you only that she had been around and had had her troubles, could not obscure the seductive sweetness in her gray-green eyes and the subtle promise of her scarlet lips.

Why would anyone want to kill her?

Ruth Murray wondered, too, why she was the target of a slayer. Could it be possible that it was her brother, Leo, who wanted her out of the way? Leo Murray, handsome, flashy, daring, was Broadway's most successful producer. He was also its most loved star—and its most hated one. He could murder his sister without a second thought if it served his purpose. And there were definite reasons why he might think Ruth's usefulness was at an end.

Two Close Calls

William Benedict, Leo's Press Representative, was someone Ruth could confide in.

"You used to be a detective, Bill," she said to him. "What would you say if twice in one week a girl almost got killed —once by almost getting shoved off a crowded subway platform and today by getting shoved in front of a car?"

"I'd say either her number was coming up or someone was trying to get rid of her. But you're imagining things. New York's naturally a dangerous place. Anyway, I wouldn't worry about anyone trying to push *you* around, Ruthie. You can take care of yourself. That's one of the three things I like about you." His knowing eyes approved of the loveliness her tailored suit could not conceal.

"What are the other two?"

He laughed. "You'd tell Leo if I told you, and then I'd lose my job. . . ."

That's the sort of amiable banter that opens MURDER IN BRIGHT LIGHTS, by Jonathan Joseph and Bryant Ford, featured complete novel in our next issue of MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE. What happens next is not so amiable!

A Broadway Murder

Leo Murray had just opened the greatest success in his career—a play called *Hour's End*. He had also made his usual quota of enemies. There was the young playwright whom Leo had robbed of all credit for writing the show. And there was the rival producer, Finley, from under whose nose Leo had stolen the enterprise.

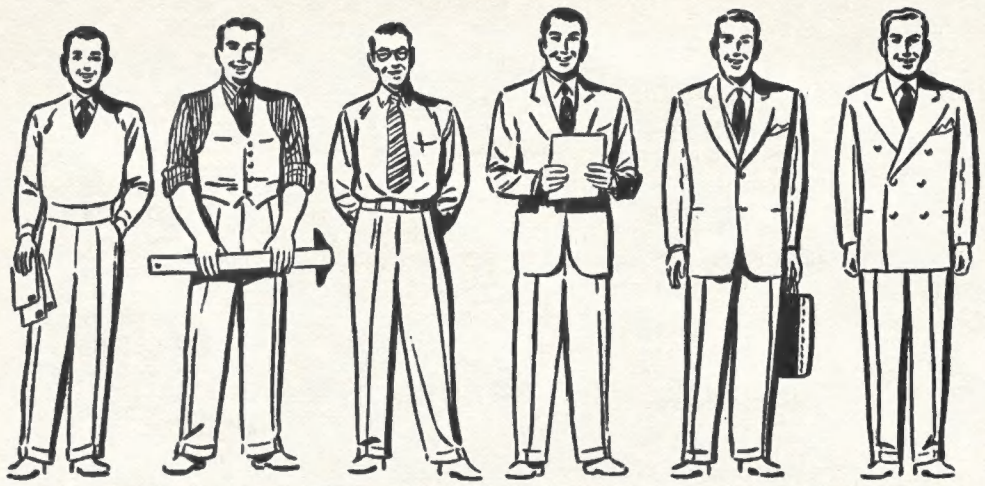
That night just after the play's opening, Ruth went to press agent Bill's apartment. The door was unlocked and she entered. When she flipped on the light she found Bill lying at her feet with blood on his head. Beyond him lay Leo Murray, face down. A long hunting knife stood upright in his back.

She roused Bill to consciousness.

"When I came in, someone hit me," he gasped. He stared at the blood which had dripped from the knife to the floor. "It couldn't have been Leo. The guy's dead. Your brother's dead!"

Yes, Leo was dead—as so many had

(Continued on Page 8)



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GOOD CRIMES are COMING

(Continued from page 6)

wished he would be. But he wasn't the only one, apparently, who was scheduled to die. The next day, Ruth—who had already had two close brushes with death—received a telegram warning her that if she didn't close down her brother's play immediately, what her brother had received, she also would get.

Not Easy to Solve

Press agent Bill was certain then that the killer was Nick Finley, the rival producer from whom Leo had stolen *Hour's End.* Bill went to see Finley, and the man's own words seemed to prove his guilt.

Bill snatched off Nick's glasses. With his other hand he punched Nick hard—and again.

"Don't you remember, Nick? I came in and you got scared—and you hit me with something. What was it? It couldn't have been just your hand." He hit Finley again and the short man fell to the floor. "Do you remember how you knocked me out?"

Finley drove his hand into his pocket and brought up a revolver. Bill saw it in time and jumped him. He pinned Nick's hand to the floor and socked a knee into him. Nick squealed. The revolver fell from his fingers.

"Stop it!" he yelled. "You'll kill me!"

Bill slid his fingers around Nick's fat throat.

But the murder of Leo Murray wasn't to be solved that easily. For even as Bill was trying to force a confession from Nick, another murder was getting under way—a murder that would completely clear Nick!

MURDER IN BRIGHT LIGHTS is a baffling, swift-paced novel—packed with punch and beautiful women. It's the sparkling story of twisted love, hate and scandal that lead to murder—and more murder. You'll find every moment of it a treat!

Dancing Sandwiches

Another short novel, sharing star billing in the next issue, brings back your favorite author, Fredric Brown. This

one is called THE CASE OF THE DANCING SANDWICHES, and it's a yarn that's as clever as its title.

Carl Bailey was taken out for an evening's entertainment by a man who called himself Vic Tremaine and a woman Vic introduced as his sister, Dorothy. Cocktails at the Astor, dinner at Lindy's. Drinks and dancing at a place in Jersey. Then they drove to a little roadhouse called Ancin and Vic's—Carl saw the neon sign with that name on it—and Vic introduced him to his partner, Dick Ancin. They got Carl drunk. About one-thirty or two o'clock they started back to New York and Carl, in Ancin's car, passed out, completely.

He woke up—or came to—about five in the morning. He was in Ancin's car, parked off the road. A little side road just inside Essex County, no houses nearby and no traffic late at night. Ancin was behind the wheel, dead. He'd been shot in the side, the side toward Carl. The gun he'd been shot with was on the floor of the car between them.

One Neat Frame

Carl promptly went to the police. He didn't realize how neatly he had been framed when it turned out that Ancin's name was really Tom Anders. Carl was still was fairly sure he could prove his innocence when his fingerprints turned up on the murder weapon and a paraffin test proved he had fired a gun. But he began to have serious doubts when an exhaustive search revealed that there was no such roadhouse as Ancin and Vic's, and no sign shop within miles had any record of a neon display being made with that name.

Carl might have rotted his life away in prison if it hadn't been for his lovely fiancée, Susan. Susan believed unshakeably in Carl's innocence, despite his prompt conviction in court. She enlisted the aid of a New York police officer named Peter Cole.

Things became a little complicated when Cole fell for Susan.

THE CASE OF THE DANCING SANDWICHES is an excellent story of a frameup and its unraveling, with some of the most brilliant detective work that

(Continued on page 144)

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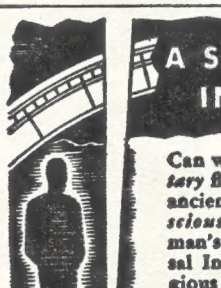

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INSPECTOR MOON WON HIS BET AND THEN . . .

IN A LOFTY NEW YORK APARTMENT, DETECTIVE INSPECTOR JIM MOON AND A MYSTERY WRITER, H.H. KYNE, ARGUE OVER THE PLAUSIBILITY OF THE LATTER'S NEWEST "WHO DONE IT" WHEN . . .

. . . AND SO, WHILE AUTHOR KYNE TRIES ARM-CHAIR DEDUCTION TO FIND THE MYSTERIOUS ARCHER, INSPECTOR MOON VISITS SPORTING GOODS STORES

THAT EVENING

JUST IMAGINE! ME THE MAIN CHARACTER IN A REAL MYSTERY!
HE'S WONDERFUL LOOKING
YES, AND WITH A DASH OF ROMANCE, IT'LL MAKE A GOOD YARN

THIN GILLETTES GIVE YOU SMOOTH, REFRESHING SHAVES THAT LOOK AS GOOD AS THEY FEEL. THAT'S BECAUSE THEY HAVE THE KEENEST, SMOOTHEST-FINISHED EDGES OF ANY LOW-PRICED BLADE ON THE MARKET. WHAT'S MORE THIN GILLETTES FIT YOUR GILLETTE RAZOR EXACTLY AND PROTECT YOU FROM DISCOMFORT. ASK FOR THIN GILLETTES IN THE HANDY 10-BLADE PACKAGE
THIN Gillette 10 BLADES
10-25¢
4-10¢
NEW TEN-BLADE PACKAGE HAS COMPARTMENT FOR USED BLADES

Murder has girl trouble

The trouble-toughened detective grabs a handful of glamour during the death-strewn pursuit of a wily blackmail combine!

CHAPTER I

SATURDAY, August 18, 6:00 p.m.——The tall man stopped sprinting as soon as he had crossed the hot asphalt of Front Street and skidded into the cool maw of the Greyhound Bus tunnel. With an effort, he forced his lean body to proceed at no more than a fast walk. Since no cry had been raised behind him, nobody paid him special attention. And, although his blue deep-set eyes darted from side to side, the rest of his gaunt hawk-nosed face remained set in impassive, almost bored lines. He did not look like a

The little man kept his face covered as the two toughs knocked him around (Chap. III)

A Max Thursday Novel by WADE MILLER

fugitive. The high concrete cave led through the city block behind the Pickwick Hotel. Passengers, porters and drivers milled around the bus which would leave San Diego at six o'clock this afternoon but they each were intent on their own flustered affairs.

They scarcely noticed the accused murderer who skirted that moment of their lives and kept going.

His name was Max Thursday. He rented an office—its glass door labeled Private Investigator—on the fourth floor of the Moulton Building, and a small duplex at the corner of Union and Ivy. He owned a car and a satisfactory bank account. But the maddening circumstances of this second Saturday in August had made it impossible for him to turn to any of these for rest or aid. He neither carried nor owned a gun.

Thursday hesitated as he reached the end of the Greyhound tunnel. The anger began to ebb from his mind, the fierce blind temper that had led to his surprising assault on the law itself one minute before. He glanced both ways along First Avenue, trying to decide. He had constructed the trap for himself and he had escaped it momentarily. Foolishly or not, he was committed to a course of action all his own. What? Because any physical gesture was a balm, he fastened the button of his tweed coat, then unbuttoned it again, irresolute, wishing he could make himself think faster. Now that he was running away, he must run *to* somewhere.

He turned right simply because he noticed that Broadway, the honking neon lit spine of San Diego, was filling with the Saturday evening trade. That struck a familiar note. The nebulous J. X. O'Connell had escaped earlier this week by vanishing into a throng on Broadway. He had escaped from Thursday who was now the pursued.

Two minutes gone. As he threaded among the slow moving fun seekers on the wide sidewalk, he became acutely conscious of passing time. He nearly could feel the watch spring expand and the minute hand advance over his left wrist. For the first time he noticed the innumerable clocks ticking away in the early lighted store windows and all their differing conceptions of time which was suddenly so important. He shook his head impatiently and shoved ahead. Two minutes gone and it would take less than five minutes to get the man-wanted call on the police radio.

He longed to break into his sprint again. The absurd urge nagged Thursday, though he knew that no matter how fast he traveled he still was only wandering aimlessly.

Dodging around an arm-in-arm line of four marines, he teetered along the curb by the taxi stand at Second and Broadway. He hesitated again, then the readily opening door of the nearest car made him recall his instructions to Joaquin Vespasian the night before, ". . . ride the bus but no taxis. You won't be noticed on a bus and, besides, the bunch that's gunning for you owns a couple hack drivers."

FOR the next block, Thursday lengthened his stride. With no new implications, his own old advice seemed good enough to follow. Ahead, across Broadway, was the Plaza, the little green park that served as a terminal for the city bus system. He had at least decided on a method if not a destination.

As if that minor decision had freed his whole mind, he became aware of the passers-by. At first, he slowed his walk because he thought his fast pace was causing all the stranger faces with their eyes to turn toward him. Then he realized that he was becoming sensitive to the presence of others, as he had become conscious of his inexorable wristwatch. Behind him and to either side, he imagined the chatting laughing

voices called him. Three minutes gone.

The Third Avenue traffic signal clanged and recolored and he suddenly had to turn right again and cross Broadway instead. The sudden change nearly panicked him, the small matter of having to cross Broadway before crossing Third when he had expected otherwise. He felt exposed in the middle of the vast street with the cars halted, waiting, it seemed, for him alone to pass and the faces veiled behind windshields watching and commenting on his progress. He didn't dare hurry and he didn't dare not hurry.

MAX THURSDAY

He reached the curb finally, his clenched palms sweating, and prepared to wait for the signal to change again so he could get across Third to the Plaza. The corner was an arena, all eyes upon him.

He had never fled from the law before. With nervous irritation, he glared around at the others trapped by the same red light and at the elderly newsboy who took it as an opportunity to proffer tomorrow morning's paper. Thursday muttered, "No." He looked around again and everybody's eyes slid away from his knowingly.

"Hi, Thursday!" The prowl car crawled across Broadway, losing speed just so one of the two uniformed men could yell at him. The policeman was Hoover and Thursday had fresh memories of him from two encounters during this last unlucky week. But the prowl car wasn't going to stop and Hoover merely grinned, so Thursday twisted his face into some sort of an expression in return. His name wasn't yet broadcast.

Thursday turned, with Hoover still looking at him, and sauntered into the drugstore. He hoped that would leave the impression that he wasn't vitally interested in the yellowish buses circulating the Plaza like bees. By the magazine rack just inside the entrance, he spun and came out into the fading sunshine again and joined the pack that was walking into the green light.

He paused by the iron chain that fenced off the grassy park and couldn't locate a carrier that was going far enough to suit him. He wanted to go at least as far as one of the beaches or . . . Thursday began to run again—physically—toward the far end of the block. The sign on the bus idling there was the answer. It spelled out the one place where he might be safe a while.

But the bus doors were already closed and the driver shifted gears, ready to trundle off. Thursday yelled, "Hey!" and charged across Fourth Avenue against the light. The driver scowled but opened up and Thursday swung aboard. Four minutes gone.

Hat low over his coarse black hair, he slumped into a rear seat, anonymous. He caught his breath and the engine vibrations, growling forward, made him feel temporarily free and better, as if in the little time he had left to him he might come up with something.

Since last Monday noon two men had

died by violence. He found it difficult to blame himself for that, no matter what the law said. But here he sat, hiding in awful aloneness, in flight from the law; and he knew he had himself chosen the tortuous route that led to this condition. Wearily, as he had before in the last six days, Thursday began to reconstruct. From the beginning. From last Monday noon when he had met Irene at the house in Loma Portal.

CHAPTER II

MONDAY, August 8, 12:00 noon.——Max Thursday parked his Oldsmobile in front of the address on Azalea Drive, took the notebook from an inside pocket of his tweed coat and pretended to look up the number again while he studied the house itself. He had a few minutes to spare before twelve noon. He had eaten an early Merchant's Monday Special in order to be in Loma Portal on the appointed hour.

He smiled, slightly but sincerely. The house pleased him; the neighborhood pleased him. In his profession Thursday allowed himself the institutional ad in the telephone directory. Word of mouth was supposed to accomplish the rest. Words from mouths in this neighborhood would pay off. Loma Portal, its well-to-do residences rising suddenly on the rim of the mud flats northwest of San Diego, was the gateway to Point Loma and some still higher income brackets.

The house on Azalea Drive sat far back on a lawn between two rows of cypress. Its two-story brown stucco front was bisected by a square tower in which the front door opened directly on the grass. Somehow while Thursday was musing pleasurably it had been opened without his seeing it at once, and a young woman was standing there waiting.

He gave a quick nod and got out of his car, tucking the notebook away. Since the flagstones rambled, he cut straight across the lawn to her, his business smile in place. He didn't suppose she'd mind about the grass since it had evidently missed this week's mowing. Halfway to her Thursday caught his toe in a small rectangular hole and stumbled. He silently thanked her for not laughing. She merely looked him over.

In a clipped New England voice she stated a fact, "You're Mr. Thursday," and then added, "Come in, please do."

He took off his hat and said, "I generally manage a more impressive approach, Miss Whitney, but your gopher hole—" She was already across the tower foyer and one step down into the broad living room. He followed, trying to step on the scattered shag rugs rather than scratch her waxed floor. Two love seats confronted one another before the empty fireplace and she took the one which faced the bay window view of the lawn.

Thursday sat opposite her, looking as gentle and attentive as possible.

The woman was not as young as he had first thought, nearer his own age, thirty-five. She wore her slight air of arrogance like a perfume. She was poised and obviously well-bred, which pleased Thursday. She would have friends who might become worthwhile clients. Her small graceful body was dressed in a summerweight suit of powder blue jersey and her dark blond hair was drawn back tight to show off the lines of her face which was more patrician than pretty. Her one sign of any nervousness was the tensely drawn cords of her throat.

She said, in the clipped way he already liked, "As I told you, my name is Irene Whitney." Catching his glance at the indentation on her ring finger, she felt the need to explain something. "It's Miss Whitney now. I'm no longer married. I'm an interior decorator." She smiled just a little. "But neither of those points matter. I called you this

Thursday knocked the mirror from Yvonne's hand before she could brain him (Chap. XI)

morning because of—well, a gambling debt."

Thursday said, "In case you don't know, gambling debts aren't legally binding. If it's owed to you, I may be able to bluff the debtor into paying off. If it's owed by you, I can probably make sure you won't be bothered any more."

IRENE WHITNEY shook her fine head impatiently. "No, I pay all my debts, Mr. Thursday. You see, I—" She took a deep breath for courage, her eyes, a paler blue than his own, still summing him up. He leaned back in the love seat so he wouldn't seem to hover over her personal secrets. He respected her for getting down to business this swiftly.

She said, without any coy pride in minor wickedness, "I've been doing some gambling over the past six months, mostly roulette. At first, I won a little but lately I've lost steadily. Quite a good deal. A thousand dollars. I gave him ten IOUs, a hundred dollars each. He—"

"Where'd you lose this money?"

"At a place called The Natchez. It's that place built out over the water at Mission Bay Park that looks like a showboat."

"I've been through it. Nightclub on the main deck. From there you take the elevator down for gambling or up for other accommodations. You went down."

Her pale blue eyes glinted faint amusement.

"I assure you I didn't know there was a choice until now."

"George Papago thinks he's quite a judge of character."

"Papago—he's the man who holds my IOUs." The cords of her throat tightened again. "Then you know him."

"Around and about. He wouldn't be such a bad guy if he could forget about angles. And he'd be better off." Thursday pulled a copy of the morning *Sentinel* from his coat pocket. He sprawled open the front page and ran his fingers down through headlines. The finger passed across the pictures of the Perry Showalter funeral and stopped on some black type farther down the page. GAMBLING SHIP OPERATOR INDICTED BY GRAND JURY.

She barely glanced at it. "I knew The Natchez had been closed."

"Yes. It was closed when the state and our hardworking district attorney, Mr. Benedict, broke the syndicate. Papago thought he was smart enough to open it again. Now Mr. Benedict has broken him."

Irene Whitney eyed him oddly. Thursday smiled coldly, angry with himself. He realized some rancor had come into his voice when speaking of Benedict and it wouldn't do to let this woman know he was on the wrong side of the district attorney.

He folded the paper noisily and said, "Well, I suppose the point is that Papago holds your notes and you want me to find him. He's out on bail. Have you tried his home? The paper gives his address as 709 Brighton Court, Mission Beach."

She shook her head again. "I haven't tried to find him. If it were that easy, I wouldn't have called you. You see, I'm being blackmailed."

"No, I hadn't seen that."

"Two days ago some woman telephoned me—it wasn't anyone I knew—and told me that I would have to pay for my IOUs. Of course, I was willing to pay what I owed and I still am. But I can't afford to pay five thousand dollars to get my notes back. That's why I want your assistance."

"Go on."

She looked questioning.

"You've only told me half of it," Thursday said. "The woman must have said, 'or else.' She'd have to. Nobody would pay five thousand bucks to redeem a thousand buck note unless there was a threat attached. What's the threat?"

She said blandly, "But I can't tell you that."

He shrugged. "That makes it a standoff. It's my job to respect your confidence and yours to supply it. Other-

wise, I can't help you, Miss Whitney."

"Oh, come now." The arrogance peeped through her smiling disbelief. "There'll be a nice fee in it for you, Mr. Thursday."

He said abruptly, "Why did you call on me particularly?"

"Well—I've read about you in the newspapers—and—"

"Uh-huh. That was two years ago. Despite the exaggerations, I'm no stick-up man and it seems to me that's what you're out to hire. I don't even own a gun, much less wear one. If you're interested in knowing, I work within the law and often with the law. The difference in my job is that I perform private services which the cops don't have the time or the right to perform. That's all a private detective amounts to, Miss Whitney."

SHE embarrassed him then by smiling at his speech. She said softly and knowingly, "I didn't intend to insult you, Mr. Thursday, and I don't ask you to act against whatever scruples you may have. But I would like you to see George Papago. I have reasons for not wanting to do it myself. Find out where my IOUs are and then redeem them for their full face value, no more. Is there anything dishonest in that?"

Thursday grinned. He liked her while he condemned his dangerous impulsiveness in liking her. But he did want her class of business. He said, "I'll see Papago this afternoon and find out just where your IOUs are. What's the number here—so I can call you about the money end?"

"I'll call you. Tomorrow sometime."

"Okay. My fee is twenty-five dollars per day plus unusual expenses, if they arise. The first day's fee is payable in advance."

"Oh, of course." She rose and went over to open the drawer of an escritoire. She returned, rummaging in her big purse for a wallet. Thursday saw the dark green of a checkbook.

"A check will do."

She pretended she didn't hear him. She held out two tens and a five and when he didn't take them immediately, she dropped them on the love seat beside him. Thursday ignored the money. He asked, "How are the Johnsons these days?"

She looked puzzled. He explained, "Your friends, the Johnsons. The people who let you use this house for our appointment. I checked Civic Center to see who owned this address. I also checked the registry of voters, the phone book and the city directory. There's no Irene Whitney listed. I'm getting a strong hunch that isn't your name."

The woman let another five dollar bill drip from her hand onto the love seat. She said:

"Does it matter?"

Thursday picked up the thirty dollars. "Call my office in the morning. I'm there by nine." She snapped her purse shut, smiling confidently. He looked up at her. "You think you've got me tabbed, Miss Whitney. Don't forget I can drop anything I feel burning my hands. I have some reasons of my own for playing along."

"Fair enough." The cool assurance fled from her face as she stared past him, out the front window. Thursday twisted around. A portly white-haired man had stopped part way up the flagstones to the front door, his red face gazing benevolently around at the ragged lawn. Then he continued his advance on the house. "I didn't expect him," the woman whispered. "Put him off, please. Tell him I'm not here." She pushed gently at his shoulder.

Thursday shrugged and ambled to the door. When he opened it the portly man frowned with surprise, then tugged down his vest and beamed rosily. "How do you do. I'm Bradstreet. How do you like it?"

"Fine." Thursday leaned across the doorway, indolently blocking it. "Can I do something for you?"

The other man blinked earnestly. Then his smile widened with tolerance.

"I'm Bradstreet—Bradstreet Realtors. I guess this place sold itself to you. See you've taken the sign down." He gestured at the grass, toward the hole Thursday had stumbled over.

Slowly, Thursday eased out of the way. "Come in. I think there's some kind of mistake going on. You say nobody lives here?"

"Not since the Johnsons put it in our hands sixty days ago. What—"

"A Miss Whitney called me out here to make an estimate on a car. I haven't seen the car yet but she's right inside. Or she was."

The two men circulated through the house. They found the sign behind the laundry tubs on the service porch, the sign that read: FOR LEASE FURNISHED—CALL BRADSTREET REALTORS. Bradstreet carried it with him for the rest of the search. They wound up in the living room where he found the house key on the love seat by Thursday's hat. But the woman who claimed the name of Irene Whitney was gone.

"Nothing missing," Bradstreet said and wiped his face. "Don't get it. She looked reputable enough. I let her have the key about ten this morning so she could brood around the place, get the feel of it, make up her mind. You know women. Then, when I saw you, I assumed I'd misheard her give her name. Thought she had a husband and you were it."

"Might have been some confidence setup or maybe she was just playing rich," Thursday said affably. "Did you see this car I was supposed to look at?"

"Didn't notice." Bradstreet led the way out the front door, locked it and rattled it viciously. "Fine place but we're asking six prices for it. And just when I thought I had a sucker to unload it on—" He stabbed his sign into its hole and used his weight to force it deeper. "One thing I should've learned by now. Never trust a blonde, age and respectability notwithstanding. They'll lie to you every time."

"Keeps a man on his toes," Thursday said and walked out to his car. He felt sure she hadn't been lying completely. Besides, he argued himself down, I owe her something for her money.

CHAPTER III

MONDAY, August 8, 2:00 p. m.——Mission Beach was the flat spit of land which divided the sparkling ocean surf from the placid bay. On both sides of the amusement park, the sandy lots were dotted with beach homes of white stucco and red tile roofs. 709 Brighton Court was one of these at the south end.

The front door was open and through the screen Thursday could see the empty living room as he punched the bell. Some child's toys lay around the carpet and three punctured beer cans sat on the coffee table.

Out of sight he could hear George Papago and a woman quarreling at the top of their lungs, but he couldn't distinguish words. At his hip a thin voice said, "You know where you can go."

Thursday looked down. A soiled, homely boy of about five had crept around the corner of the house and up onto the concrete step. He was skinny, big-eyed, and sallow despite the blazing sun. "Hi," Thursday said. "Do you live here?"

"You know where you can go," the youngster repeated solemnly.

"I'm looking for Mr. Papago. Does he live here?"

The boy brushed by him into the house and let the screen slam between them. He stood inside, his mouth hanging open, staring at the tall man. When Thursday punched the bell again, he piped helpfully, "It don't work."

Papago yelled from somewhere in the rear, "Georgie! Who you talking to?"

The boy flinched. "Just a man, daddy! He looks like a cop!"

"Huh?" Papago padded into the living room, the olive skin of his face and neck flushed with irritation. He was a slick young Greek with clever eyes and a black line of mustache. He wore green slacks, open-toed sandals, and a blue sport shirt buttoned at the throat in spite of the heat. He calmed down a little when he saw his visitor, asked him in and offered him a beer.

Thursday said no, thanks. Papago got one for himself in the kitchen, chased the gaping Georgie out of the living room and sank moodily onto the davenport. "What you doing these days, Thursday?"

"This and that. Reading about you in the paper mostly."

"You wouldn't be working for the D.A. now, would you?" When Thursday laughed, Papago said, "Glad to see somebody who isn't. All I meet any more are Benedict's boys, trying to sew me up."

"How bad have they got you, George?"

"Could be worse. I'll get off with a fine, says my lawyer." He gulped off most of the beer. "That cold fish Benedict acts like I slew the mayor or some such stunt. What did I do so wrong? Sure, my setup was against the law, but what isn't these days? People got to do something, entertain themselves somehow, don't they?"

"Sure." Thursday listened for the woman he knew was in the house but he couldn't hear her.

Papago snarled on about his troubles. "That's what's losing my mind for me! Waiting for the trial to get over, so I'll be free to open up in some other line. You might know how a thing like this louses up your credit.

In the distance, an ice-cream wagon tinkled. Immediately Georgie scampered in from the bedroom, shouting, "Give me a nickel! Give me a nickel!"

"Shut up!" Papago yelled. "Can't you see I'm talkin?"

The boy said stubbornly, "Mommy said for you to give me a nickel."

Papago swore and finally dug out some coins and gave one to Georgie who

Thursday cracked Korner on the side of the jaw, and he fell back (Chap. XII)

banged out through the front screen. "That kid can hear the Good Humor wagon a mile off. He can't hear me across the room." He dropped the loose change back in his pocket and fiddled with a torn pamphlet that he had pulled out with the money.

Thursday figured it was a horoscope from the zodiacal symbols he could see on the cover. "You looking for lucky days?"

"Me?" Papago scornfully tossed the pamphlet on the coffee table in front of him. "What's the scoop on you, Thursday? You didn't stock up on crying towels just because the D.A. has me across the barrel."

"Always glad to see Benedict pick on somebody else for a change." Thursday grinned. "But you're right, George. I got business."

"Righto. Name it."

"I have a client, a Miss Irene Whitney. She's an interior decorator, just gotten a big commission back in New York. Happened all of a sudden when—but that doesn't matter to you. The point is that she's had to leave town in a hurry and she hired me to wind up her affairs."

PAPAGO was intent with curiosity. "I don't get it."

"Well, the list of business she gave me had your name on it. She owes you some notes on dough she dropped at The Natchez. Five hundred bucks."

"You got that wrong. It was a thousand. A hundred ten times."

"You're probably right. I have it written down somewhere. Anyway, she wants me to pay up for her."

"You still got your wires crossed, Thursday," said Papago. "Those IOUs were picked up last week by her lawyer. Course, I don't mind getting paid twice if she don't mind." He laughed until he noticed Thursday's p r o b i n g eyes. "What's the m a t t e r ? If anybody's thrown you a curve, it wasn't me."

Thursday grinned. "Wasted my time coming out here, that's all. The Whitney woman must have forgotten about it in the rush. Her lawyer, huh? You mean Fisher—young fellow, dark hair."

Papago laughed at him again. "You even got the wrong lawyer. This was a tall character—like you—by name of J. X. O'Connell. Know him? Gray hair and cookie duster. The Harris-tweeds and walking-stick type."

"Oh, O'Connell, sure. George, do you happen to have his address handy?"

Papago said, "Wouldn't be surprised." Then his eyes narrowed calculatingly. "Don't you have it?"

"Back at the office some place. I figured you could save me a trip back down town."

"Righto," said the gambler thoughtfully. "I get it."

A long-legged, husky woman strode in from the bedroom, smiling self-consciously. Her brown eyes were set wide apart, like an animal's, in a heavy-boned face. For all her large scale, she was sensually handsome. The brown hair that hung down the back of her gold blouse had just been carefully brushed, and Thursday realized why she hadn't shown up before. She had been dressing up for company in black hostess pajamas and gold sandals. He rose politely.

Papago stayed where he was and said indifferently, "Nell. Max Thursday."

She shook Thursday's hand and asked how he'd been in a healthy voice. Then she looked at Papago finishing his beer. "Say, why can't all of us have a beer together?"

Papago set the empty can down with a crash. "What you think, I got no manners? He don't want a beer!"

"But how was I to know, tell me that!"

"If somebody don't want something, I don't force it or me down their throat. Like some people I could name."

"What do you want me to do all my life—stay in the bedroom?" N e l l snapped and the glow in her dull eyes dared him to answer. She wheeled on Thursday, winningly. "Wouldn't you really like a beer, Mr. Thursday?"

Thursday smiled and said, "I don't

want to start a war. Or let you drink alone, either. You decide."

Nell was loftily triumphant as she returned from the kitchen to distribute three foaming cans of beer. Then she spotted the horoscope pamphlet Papago was toying with again.

"Hey," she cried, "so that's where it was! You've gone and torn it!"

Papago pulled the horoscope out of her reach and tore it again, deliberately. "And that's what'll happen to any more I find around here, too."

Nell's stormy reply was lost in the slam of the screen door as Georgie trotted back into the house, his tongue working over a chocolate ice-cream cone. Papago growled, "And don't drip that thing on the rug."

"Come here, honey." Nell soothed the youngster against her leg and petted his hair.

Thursday tossed off the rest of his beer. "About that O'Connell's address, George," he prompted.

"Righto," said the Greek. His eyes rested thoughtfully on Georgie's ice-cream cone. He laid the ripped horoscope in front of him on the coffee table. Then he got out his wallet and extracted a business card from it. He put the card down by the horoscope, glanced up to see if Thursday was ready and read off the address. "3319 30th Street."

"I thought it was in some building downtown."

Nell started to speak and then changed her mind. Thinking clumsily, she watched Papago, and Thursday watched them both. The gambler replaced the card in his wallet. Then he balled the horoscope and flung it into a corner.

Nell didn't explode as Thursday expected. She remained contemplative. Thursday got up and added his empty to those on the coffee table. "Thanks a million. Good luck with the D.A."

"Righto," Papago said absently, not rising. "See you around."

Nell followed him to the door, Georgie clinging to a fold of pajama leg. "So glad to make your acquaintance. Drop in any time, now you know the way."

Thursday thanked her, bid the chocolate-mouthed youngster good-by and went out to his car. At the next intersection of the main thoroughfare, Mission Boulevard, he pulled off the road and parked behind a garage.

He didn't have to wait long. Within five minutes a Chrysler Town and Country convertible coupe shot by him, headed south towards downtown. George Papago's scheming face was behind the wheel. He had added a sport coat to his ensemble and a green panama hat with a wide flowered band. The flashy Chrysler was out of sight around the corner of the garage before Thursday could get the license number.

Thinking over the thousand-and-one stunts which Papago might be up to, Thursday drove back to San Diego and stopped at an Owl drugstore. Again, he checked through the phone book and the city directory.

There was no such person as J. X. O'Connell. He was the second nonexistent person who had turned up today.

Thursday checked the 30th Street address as a matter of routine. This fringe of the North Park suburb was loosely a business district: homes elbowed other homes which had been converted into shoe repair shops and dressmaking establishments.

3319 existed. It was an ice cream cone, upside down.

The stucco cone, three stories high, was one of those depression built refreshment stands which housed one enterprise after another down through the years. Apparently, coats of whitewash kept the flimsy pointed structure from falling apart. High on its tip, another ice-cream cone, this of fraying plaster and rightside up and a mere yard long, still balanced like a dancer.

Thursday chuckled as, parked by the curb, he traced the workings of Papago's mind. He read the metal sign swinging over the shabby lawn: JOAQUIN VESPASIAN, PERSONAL RELATIONS COUN-

SELLOR. In smaller letters this was explained: Phrenologist, Spiritual Consultant, Your Personality As Revealed By Your Palm, Helpful Secrets Of The Egyptians, Handwriting Analyzed. Then, challengingly, Why Not Meet The Real You?

"Tightrope walker," Thursday murmured. A history of local legislation was layered in the sign. The Future Foretold had been painted over long ago when the city banned fortune-telling. More recently, Psychologist had been obliterated when requirements were tightened.

Inside the cone somebody shrieked.

Thursday shut off his engine and sprinted up to the door in the circular base of the building. He stopped outside the wedged-open door and stayed there since the fight going on inside was none of his business.

The two big men in dungarees were of Italian or Portuguese descent. Even knotted in anger, their swarthy faces looked like the same family. One was older and slower than the other.

They swore in growls as they knocked a little plaid-suited man around the dinky room. The little man whimpered and didn't do much fighting. He kept his face covered and tried to run away but the other two always caught him, knocking him against the wall with roundhouse swings. The victim wasn't being hurt so badly that Thursday could see, despite his noises. Thursday went back out to his car to lean against it and light a cigarette.

A few more crashing sounds and the two swarthy men stomped out, glowered at Thursday as they passed and drove away in a battered pickup truck. Thursday went into the ice-cream cone and looked around.

The front half of the building was a cheaply furnished consultation room with a large round table, some chairs which Thursday set up again, cupboards, and two display cases. One case featured magic tricks—"Fool Your Friends"; the other glass box showed off twisted roots and various statuettes, charms which "The Ancients Superstitiously Believed Would Bring Luck—Are You Lucky Enough?" Some dingy prayer rugs were kicked around on the floor and the walls were hung occasionally with imitation silk shawls of Chinese design.

The rear half of the building seemed to be divided into two smaller rooms; a bedroom and a hotplate kitchen. The little man came out of the bedroom nervously, brushing off his plaid trousers. He had put salve on one side of his low forehead where the swelling had started.

To Thursday's grin, he responded sullenly with, "Two of them, you notice. One of them couldn't have done it." Then he opened a cupboard, said, "Well, a little of the old tonic," and upended a bottle briefly. He didn't offer Thursday a drink.

JOAQUIN VESPASIAN was small, five-six, but proportionate. Only his shifty eyes were full size which gave him a wise smirking look. With his round face and plastered-down hair nearly the same shade of tan, he reminded Thursday of the bronze owl trademarks in the drugstore he had just left. He represented a cheaper gaudier edition of the George Papago class. Too many rings glittered on his stubby grasping hands.

"Since you're looking so curious," said Vespasian, "that last performance was put on by the Lalli family. Rosa comes here for personality adjustments and invaluable self-knowledge. Her father and brother have got dirty suspicious minds. Now what can I do for you?"

"About that self-knowledge." Thursday tried a shot in the dark. "You're getting into deep trouble."

"Not me." Vespasian folded a stick of gum, fit it into his mouth and chewed knowingly. "They didn't find Rosa here, did they?" He winked and jerked a thumb toward his back door. "Bus line just one half block away."

"I don't care about your girl troubles.

How about this other? Who's this J. X. O'Connell going around buying up other people's gambling debts?"

"Brother, you're shaking the wrong tree."

Thursday had figured he was but he remained lounging solemnly against the edge of the round table while Vespasian swaggered around the office, straightening it up some. Thursday watched him chew his gum and turn over ways to make a fast buck out of this.

"On the other hand, maybe you got something," Vespasian said suddenly and Thursday nearly laughed. "First, I'd have to know your angle."

Thursday held out one of his cards for the little man to read.

"Glad to meet you, Maxie. Who's your principal?"

"I'm my principal. Don't keep the card."

"Why not? You want to find a guy. I might call you with something."

"You won't call me with anything. And I don't want my card found on your body."

Vespasian said suspiciously, "What kind of a threat is that?"

"Not any kind. Put me down as quaint. I try not to leave my cards with finaglers because they come to such bad ends."

"Now, let's not be hasty. Who's your client?"

"Let's not be funny."

"Look, Maxie—" Vespasian put a confidential hand on Thursday's elbow—"we're both smart enough to know the private cop business is based on contact work. Now this setup I got might not look much to a big fellow like you but things drift through here, little things you might use." When he got to selling, Vespasian talked in a breathless yapping voice like a terrier. "Of course, I don't pretend that this crystal ball pitch is anything but the old fakeroo."

"No kidding?"

"Sure thing. Lay a soothing hand on the worried lady's forehead and she's sold—for money. I get along. You know that, your racket's pretty much the same, isn't it? Now, I'm one of the finest little contacts you could make, Maxie. You can ask them down at the police department, go ahead. They'll tell you I'm inside and often. How about it?"

"How about what?"

"A small down payment makes a working agreement between us."

THURSDAY pulled out his wallet and glanced into it casually. Vespasian chewed his gum faster. Thursday said, "I may have an angle myself."

"What's that?"

"That you stand a better chance of running across J. X. O'Connell if I tip you afterwards." He put his wallet away and buttoned his hip pocket.

"You know it, Maxie. I see we think the same way. J. X. O'Connell? He's your boy."

Thursday was obliged to shake his damp little hand.

"By the by," Vespasian asked as if it had barely occurred to him, "what brought you around to me?"

"A good friend of yours. George Papago."

Vespasian looked confused.

Thursday said, "Our mutual friend George wanted to hand me a phony address for one reason or another. Right at that time he was playing with one of your horoscopes. When his kid walked in licking an ice-cream cone, this place came to mind. So he read me your address off the horoscope instead of the one I wanted."

"Well, well. You're quite an operator yourself, Maxie."

"Thanks. The joker is that the address George held back is also a phony."

Vespasian smiled innocently. "Just who's this George? I don't believe I know him."

"That's kind of weird. You're selling your goods to his girl friend Nell. I think George is another one with a dirty suspicious mind."

"Oh, Nell Kopke! And George Papago. I didn't get his name the first time."

"Sure not. Where's your phone?" Vespasian showed him into the rumpled bedroom. Thursday looked up the Papago number and rang the house in Mission Beach. Nell answered with an angry hello.

Thursday said gruffly, "This is Charley. George around?"

Somewhere about town, Papago would know a Charley.

Nell said, "No, he's not here, Charley. The slob took off an hour ago to get drunk. I don't know when he'll be back. And I don't much care."

"Okay, thanks." Thursday hung up and frowned at the pinup calendar over the bed. Papago hadn't returned yet. He might have stayed out to look for J. X. O'Connell. Obviously, he had sensed something profitable in Irene Whitney's IOUs.

By Thursday's elbow, Vespasian wasn't missing a thing. "Maxie, you're baffled. I think I got the answer. You—"

"I'm often baffled," Thursday said. "It comes of being born under a question mark."

CHAPTER IV

MONDAY, August 8, 7:00 p. m.——He considered it a long time, stirring a cup of coffee in a drive-in, wondering whether the case was worth pushing. The presence of two non-existent persons in it both intrigued Thursday and cautioned him. He called Papago's house again—as Charley—and Nell Kopke said that George hadn't returned. That was five o'clock and made it even more probable that Papago was still looking for J. X. O'Connell or had found him.

Still telling himself he wasn't certain he wanted to mix in this, Thursday called the city's two leading job printing plants where he had contacts. No one answering to Papago's description had tried to run down O'Connell through his faked business card. That was the logical foot-aching method, the sort of method which wouldn't appeal to George Papago.

The Bureau of Motor Vehicles was closed and there was no exact way to procure the license number of Papago's Chrysler. However, he could still keep an eye out for a flashy convertible. When that thought came to Thursday, he knew his curiosity was replacing his better sense—as it had with Irene Whitney. He gave in. He would wander around town, hoping to cross the gambler's trail. Papago was the nearest link to his fictitious client's fictitious attorney.

Thursday caught a quick sandwich for dinner and drove downtown. A navy port, a tourist resort—San Diego had more than its share of bars. It was now seven o'clock and it was in the bars that Papago's circle of acquaintances would be appearing from nowhere and preparing to operate. But where to start?

Arbitrarily, he began looking along Market Street in the neighborhood of the Bridgway Hotel, the shady flophouse where he had undergone the rocky days after the war. He drifted from bar to bar, not drinking, only ordering a cheap beer when the bartender appeared uncooperative. Occasionally he greeted customers or waiters whom he knew and who served as tipsters for his agency. He learned nothing. After an hour he swung north to F Street where swarms of white-capped sailors crowded Patrick's and the Rainbow Gardens and lined up before the burlesque theater.

At the Camelot, he picked up the first trail of the gambler.

"George?" said the barhop, sorting her change. "Yeah, he was in a while back, looking for somebody. Guess it must have been you, huh, bud?"

The trail got warm through three successive F Street places. But the answers were the same in all of them: "Sure, he was here, had a shot and shoved off." Except that he had predicted Papago's methods exactly, Thursday's hunt was

failing. He was running a full hour behind the gambler.

At ten o'clock he stepped out of the phone booth of the Aces Up and sauntered through the jukebox din back to his untasted beer. He had just called the Papago house again. No answer; now Nell was out also. With the Aces Up, Thursday had canvassed all of the bars south of Broadway. Which direction had the gambler taken? Uptown, the waterfront, or toward the suburbs?

The bartender waddled down to Thursday's corner of the bar. He filled a tray with sparkling needles of shattered ice and picked up their previous conversation, taking a new tack. "You say you're a friend of Papago's?"

"Same sorority."

The bartender looked him over. "Well, you might do him a favor if you felt like it." Thursday raised his eyebrows. The bartender laid a gold cigarette lighter on the hardwood. "That's the Greek's. He left it here when he was in. George was pretty well flying tonight."

Thursday smiled ruefully. He could believe that. He felt bloated himself just from sitting over beers. If Papago had downed a drink in each bar . . . "You'll probably see him before I will," he said. "I been hoping I'd catch up with him, but—" He shrugged.

The bartender tossed the lighter on a lower shelf. "Well, I tried. I ran after him but he'd already gunned out in that fancy bus of his and he didn't hear me yell, I guess. I hate to get stuck with customers' jewelry."

"George is a hard man to make listen," Thursday said. Then, "Which way'd he go—or did you notice?"

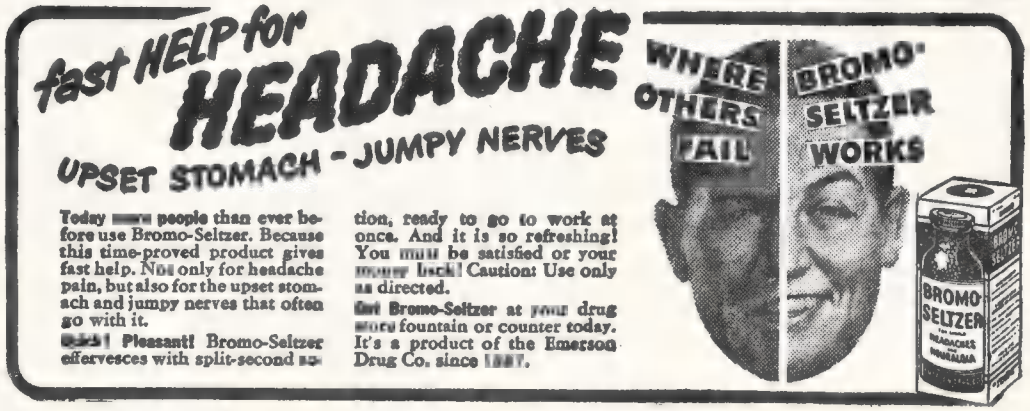
"Up Third. The Pickwick, The Fremont, that neck of the woods. Hey, anything wrong with the beer?"

THURSDAY strode directly to his parked sedan, beginning to enjoy the warm night air. He laughed at his own rationalization. When luck was good, he called it brains; when it went bad, it was nothing but bad luck. He drove up Third Avenue to Broadway and the cluster of big downtown hotels —San Diego, Pickwick, John C. Fremont, and U. S. Grant. As he circled their blocks, he scanned the lines of parked cars on both sides of the street.

In less than five minutes of searching, he located a Chrysler Town and Country convertible that looked like the gambler's. It was parked as if for display under a streetlight at the corner of Third and B. Thursday pulled into the loading zone directly behind it and got out. He kicked himself mentally for not thinking of getting the license number early enough.

A glance around and he sauntered up to the empty convertible and tried the door. It was locked. The registration slip was buckled around the steering post but it was in shadow. Thursday flattened his face against the glass to peer at it.

[*Turn page*]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A heavy voice behind him said, "What's the trouble here, fellow?"

Thursday straightened and smiled at the young patrolman who had come around the corner. "Evening, officer. I was just trying to satisfy my curiosity."

"Your car or not?"

"No." Thursday sighed. "Wish it were. You see, I've been thinking of buying a new one and these Chryslers kind of interest me. I was sneaking a look at the inside."

The big young policeman, looking uncomfortable in his new uniform, studied Thursday. Finally he said, "Okay. You've had your look."

"Take it easy," Thursday told him amiably and walked on. He wanted to stay near Papago's car and wait for the gambler to return. But not with the suspicious rookie in the neighborhood.

Instead, he returned to touring the bars. The Jade, Club Royal, Cuckoo Club, Stork Club, Gold Rail—Papago's tipsy condition had left a plain trail down Third Avenue. These were glossier places than the ones earlier, more officers and petty officers, more neckties. The time gap had been cut down to a half hour.

Thursday sped up his search. He sensed that he was closing in and he stepped in and out of nightclubs, asking brief questions but mainly looking for the Greek's face. He had nearly completed the circuit of drinking spots within walking distance of the Chrysler when the chase ended—but without George Papago. At a quiet knotty-pine bar, McCloskey's Shining Hour, the sallow bartender remembered him clearly.

"That's the lad, all right," he told Thursday. "I thought I recognized him from the papers or somewhere. He pulls up a stool alongside a tall gentleman with gray hair who had a scotch-and here at the bar. They had a talk."

"This gentleman a good dresser?" Thursday asked. Inside, he was feeling hollow. He had lost his evening-long race with Papago. Once the gambler and O'Connell got their heads together, the picture was bound to get complicated. "Mustache—walking stick—that sort of thing?"

"That's it. It was the walking stick that made me notice him—like some character out of the Esquire ads. You know."

"Happen to hear what they were talking about?"

"Not me, mister," the bartender said stiffly. "I make it a rule not to butt in unless I'm asked to butt in." He got friendly again. "Anyway, they didn't stay long enough. Your lad with the load—what'd you say the slick one's name was?—he wanted to shove off somewhere, I think."

THURSDAY blew out his breath, telling himself it didn't matter as much as he was making out. But it was irritating to lose a race. His disappointment must have showed through because the bartender said solicitously, "Wanted to see him tonight, eh?"

"About a job," Thursday agreed absently.

"Well, you might get it if you hurried. They went out, oh, at least twenty minutes ago. Then the old guy came back in and made a phone call from that booth. If they're walking they can't have gotten very far." The bartender shook his head. "And the lad certainly wasn't in any shape for driving."

Thursday planted a dollar on the bar and plunged out under the streetlights again. He ran down the sidewalk, heading for Papago's car. He rounded the corner and stopped.

The convertible was gone. For a moment, he relieved his feelings by swearing viciously. Then he laughed softly at himself. He had used up all the luck he deserved by tracking the gambler as far as he had. Tomorrow he could start dealing with Papago on a new basis.

He had left his own car unlocked. He walked around in the street and got into the driver's seat. His hand reached the

key halfway to the ignition when he saw what lay beside him. The light from the streetlamp flung a glowing oblong pattern across the front seat. And framed in the light was a green panama hat with a wide flowered band.

The crown had been crushed. Gingerly, Thursday lifted it, keeping his fingers away from the dark wet stains. He made sure none of the blood had come off on the upholstery. Stamped into the sweatband were the initials he expected. G. P.

He laid the hat down again, carefully. He meditated, staring out through the windshield at the intersection and the neon signs that still offered entertainment down the avenue. For some reason, George Papago had been put out of the picture. Thursday shook his head; he had expected complications from the gambler but not this one. Papago had drunk too much, he had driven too sharp a bargain with . . . well, presumably the shadowy J. X. O'Connell.

But why had the hat been left in Thursday's car? A warning? Or a trap?

Either way, it angered him. Either way, it added up to a challenge. Somebody—O'Connell, whatever his name was—was getting clever with him. Thursday scowled and skinned his lips back over his teeth.

The proper place for the crushed hat right now was the police department. He could turn it in and start unwinding his explanations about his client with the phony name and about his unsuccessful chase through most of the bars. He would have to explain several times, finally to the district attorney himself. After that, at the luckiest, he would get lectured and blocked out of the Whitney-Papago-O'Connell case for good.

His smile was grim as he kicked the engine to life and pulled away from the curb. There were three persons who, on the surface, knew of his connection with this case. Nell, Papago's mistress—his common-law widow now, most likely. The so-called Irene Whitney—whereabouts unknown. And Joaquin Vespasian, the annoying little sharper who had been dragged across the path as a red herring by Papago.

"Well, you never know," Thursday mused.

It was considerably out of his way going home but he drove out to 30th Street where the whitewashed ice cream cone loomed ghostly against the night sky. Meticulously and silently, Thursday hung Papago's smashed panama on the front doorknob. Then he went home to wait for the next move.

CHAPTER V

THURSDAY, August 9, 9:00 a.m.——He could find nothing in the morning papers, *Union* or *Sentinel*, relating to George Papago. He ate breakfast in the waffle shop near the Moulton Building and rode up to his fourth-floor office shortly after nine o'clock.

"Hey! Maxie!" Joaquin Vespasian hovered and fidgeted outside his office door. His fingertips looked damp, as if he had been biting his nails. But he mustered a sickly smart-aleck grin for Thursday. "Didn't I tell you to leave it to me? Brother, I got something!"

Thursday nodded gravely, spun his keys around his finger and didn't unlock the door. "What besides the jitters?"

"Inside," Vespasian advised and winked. Under one arm, rumpling his cheap pinstripe suit, he lugged a cardboard box. Thursday opened for business. He took his time adjusting the venetian blinds and the little man shifted his feet impatiently.

Thursday asked, "Okay, what?"

Vespasian set the hatbox on the desk importantly but kept a hand on the lid. "What's it worth?"

"I got a hat. Not interested."

"Don't joke, Max. This is big. I want a cut."

"I'd have to see it."

Vespasian swept the lid off the box with a flourish. Thursday lifted out a green panama between thumb and forefinger. The bloodstains had dried darkly, patterning the battered rear of the hat. Papago had been sapped from behind.

Thursday sank into his swivel chair and stared calmly across the desk at Vespasian. But he had begun to seethe inside. He had never liked George Papago or his kind. But, even with the gambler drunk, the murderer hadn't had nerve enough to risk a frontal attack. And now Vespasian had come to sell the dead man's hat. Thursday stared at him, feeling unclean himself, remembering last night how clever he had considered Max Thursday who made chess moves with the victim's clothes.

Vespasian sidled into the client chair and said nervously, "Well?"

Thursday snapped, "Where'd this come from?"

"Surely you recognize it?"

"Nothing sure about it. I saw one like it yesterday and that's all."

"But the initials—G. P.—here on the band?" Vespasian's stubby forefinger shook as he pointed. "George Papago. What do you say to that?"

"What do you say? That you killed him?"

"No, no! Look." Vespasian jumped out of the chair and leaned across the desk. "I'm doing you the favor, Max. You know my business setup; I live there, too. When I got up this morning and opened the front door, I found this hat lying just outside. The color—and then the initials—it's pretty distinctive. It couldn't belong to anyone else but Papago."

Thursday dug a battered pack of Raleighs out of a drawer and lit up. "Get to the point. Get to me."

"You? Why, Papago played a dirty trick of some sort on you yesterday afternoon. Now something's happened to him. As a friend, I risked my tail bringing that thing up here to you. I want to get together. What's it worth?"

"Thanks, friend," Thursday murmured. For a moment, he watched the cigarette smoke coil up. Then he said, "Let's play that back again. Vespasian, in your business you would have an afternoon and evening trade—not a morning trade. Another fact: cheap operators like you always sleep in the mornings. I never saw a sharp boy yet that didn't have a sense of luxury. So—what were you doing up early enough to find that hat before the paper boy or the milkman? What are you doing up this early right now?"

VESPASIAN'S round tan face paled a little but he managed to smirk. He sat down again, watchfully. "Okay. I missed that point, didn't I? Here's the way it really was. I didn't spend most of the night in *my* bed. When I got home—it was about three—I found that thing hanging on my front doorknob. Except for that, the rest of it's true, believe me."

"I'm not going to," Thursday said flatly. "You didn't dash up to see me because I might be in trouble. You thought you might be in trouble."

"Okay, have it your way." Vespasian chewed his lip sullenly. "We'll forget the money angle this time. The hat makes it look like Brother Papago came to a pretty rough end. Well, Papago dropped around to my place a couple days back and told me off. He didn't like me—ah, handling his Nell's business."

"What's one more jealous husband on your long list?"

"Listen, when a character gives my address to promote some deal and that same night his bloody hat is hung on my door, why, even I get a little jumpy. And I been around, Maxie." His owl eyes half-closed wisely. "I thought you'd want in on the free-for-all."

"So your story is that you're being framed."

"Got a better one? Otherwise—"

"No alibi for last night."

Vespasian winked. "She'd never admit it."

"Put me down for a copy of your memoirs when you find time to write them. Those I want to read."

"I keep busy," Vespasian said comfortably.

"Busy lying. An honest man would have taken that hat straight to the cops."

"Frankly, Maxie, I wouldn't know."

Despite himself, Thursday laughed. Then he stood up. "Grab your hat," he said, "and let's go."

"I take it you're representing me. About the finances—"

"Nope. All I'll do is chaperone you down to police headquarters."

Vespasian blinked. "Wait—a—minute!"

"Where'd you park your car?"

"Now, wait a minute. What you pulling? I gave you that dope in confidence. You can't run me in after—"

"Relax. I'm returning your favor, Vespasian. If you're telling the truth, you're in the clear. If you're not, I can't pull you out anyway. You tell your story to Lieutenant Clapp. That way, you'll be covered if anything does pop on the Papago business."

"Oh." Vespasian caught on. "Connections?"

Thursday nodded and herded the little man ahead of him. They drove to the foot of Market Street in Vespasian's faded Ford sedan, left it in the police parking lot and tramped into the restful corridors of the headquarters, a low tile-roofed Spanish building that enclosed a flowered patio. Clapp was out and they sat on a hard antiqued bench outside his office, waiting. Thursday smoked in thoughtful silence but Vespasian drummed his fingers on the hatbox and tried to make conversation.

A half hour lagged by before the homicide chief's big body blocked the sunny entrance. He was tired and rumpled but plainly pleased with the world as he strode down the hall. "Up since three on a murder," he told Thursday as they all settled around his tiny office. Austin Clapp had a heavy face, tanned and shrewd, beneath a dappled crop of gray-and-brown hair. He kept scratching his unshaven jaw and his eyes, bloodshot this morning, idly dissected Vespasian.

"Anyone we know?" Thursday asked casually. Vespasian's fingers beat a quicked tattoo on the hatbox.

"I doubt it. A carhop out at one of the El Cajon drive-ins. Knifed her and dumped her down a canyon. A male hair on her shoulder where some guy had laid his head. Spectrum showed lead filings on the hair. So when we hauled in her boy friends we landed a steamfitter. He still had the jackknife on him." Clapp loaded the pipe Thursday had given him last Christmas and sighed happily through the smoke cloud. "I wish they all got over in seven hours. Well, what trouble you in now, Max?"

"Haven't classified it yet." Thursday took the hatbox from Vespasian. "Mr. Vespasian here wishes to bring forth some evidence in what he believes may be a homicide case. In exchange, of course, he's looking for evidentiary immunity, which I told him you could fix."

"Um," grunted Clapp and his steel-gray eyes drilled through Vespasian. "Let's have it."

Vespasian glanced at Thursday, who nodded. Vespasian began talking rapidly, occasionally stammering. He repeated the story he had told Thursday, the final version.

After Clapp had looked over the bloodstained panama, he asked gently, "And why did you go to Thursday with this instead of to us?"

"Just a mistake. I got confused and didn't use the old head," Vespasian said. "Maxie and I being old friends back in Denver and him being a—"

"That's right, Clapp," Thursday cut in smoothly. "Vespasian did a foolish thing, he realizes that, but most people do when something like this comes up. I steered him right down here."

Clapp grunted and ran his tongue across his teeth. "Well, let's have your full name, address and phone," he or-

dered Vespasian and wrote them down. "That's fine and dandy, Mr. Vespasian. We appreciate your coming down here."

Vespasian popped out of his chair, wiping his hands on his flashy suit. "I guess I'm free to go?"

"As a bird. We'll want you handy if anything does come of this matter, so stick around town." Clapp smiled his friendly smile. "Otherwise, don't worry."

VESPASIAN grinned and nodded, winked at Thursday and slid out of the office like a minnow. There was a silence after the door drifted shut. Then Clapp said softly, "Now just what the heck was that pig-latin about evidentiary immunity—Maxie?"

Thursday laughed. "How would he know you're an honest man? I had to spin something to get him down here. Otherwise, he might have just burned up the hat and you'd never have seen it."

"Why didn't he anyway? He's the type?"

"Beats me. He came sucking around me with that leaky story. I thought the smart thing would be to set it up so he could still run around. That's your own method, as I remember. The pass-out-rope method."

"Your compliments always mean an angle. What's this one?"

Thursday met his eyes easily, "No angle. Just a favor for a buddy."

"Uh-huh." Clapp scratched his beard and grinned. "George Papago was a boy for angles, too." He grinned broader at another thought. "And if Papago has gone under, I'd like to see Benedict's face. He was going to make quite a lesson out of that gambling trial."

Thursday yawned openly.

Clapp murmured, "Just *you* stay clear of Benedict, son."

"Sure, Clapp. When does he start leaving me alone?"

"Remember he's as honest as you or me. You two are just different types that ought to avoid each other. He's the type that's so honest he's almost vindictive. And you do have four killings to your credit. All legal, of course, but—"

Thursday gazed out at the sun-wilted flowers in the patio. After a moment, he shrugged and smiled wryly. "Well, I've lived that down everywhere but the D. A.'s office. Can't ask for everything."

Clapp had begun scribbling notes. "And that woman Papago lives with might know something. Nell something or other—not Papago, I'm sure of that. And we'll tie a man onto Vespasian, just to be safe. I didn't know you knew him." He dialed the laboratory and gave orders.

"I didn't know *you* knew him."

"Not personally, Max. Vespasian's been around town since '39 or '40, I think. Richards—Vice Detail—has mentioned him. He passes tips to Richards every now and then. Anything for a buck."

"It beats working."

"That's what the bright boys tell me." Clapp considered the unburning bowl of his pipe and then knocked it empty against the side of his battered wooden desk. "I jus' had a bright idea myself. You know how my mind rambles on. But if I were a private cop like you and I had some interest in George Papago and I thought he'd been killed—you know what I'd do? I'd call on a dumb homicide lieutenant, throw him the bait and let him do my work for me." He smiled engagingly at Thursday.

"You're wasting your time with the government, Clapp. You ought to be in private industry."

"Max, you never were in Denver in your life. What's this Vespasian to you, anyway?"

"I'm taking up yoga and he knows every position."

"I never got a straight answer out of you yet." Clapp frowned, trying to look fatherly. "You know, your troubles are a big heart, a fat head and a temper. You get impulsive and try to clean things up too fast, something I had knocked out of me before I reached your

age. After all, you're no shining knight on a—"

A lab assistant bustled in to pick up the hatbox and carry it away. When he had gone, Thursday chuckled. "I haven't done a thing this morning to earn a lecture except be a good little citizen."

"Maybe." Clapp worked his mouth and grimaced at the taste in it. "I just know when to get suspicious of you, Max. Don't forget I've seen too many of the bright boys try to make a good thing out of a bad thing. Trying to make some calamity pay off, they get out in the woods, get good and lost morally. This business we're in is pretty inviting that way sometimes. But the complications can drag you into a whole circusful of mischief—if you let them. It's always up to you, of course."

"Don't worry," Thursday said. "I try not to get that cute."

Clapp hit his shoulder as he got up to lock the door to the hall. "Anyway, I'll keep you up on this hat business. You've worked hard enough for it." He stooped beside the little icebox in the corner. "Now when's the last time you drank a beer?"

"Yesterday afternoon at two-thirty." Thursday grinned crookedly. "How's that for a straight answer?"

CHAPTER VI

TUESDAY, August 9, 1:30 p. m.——Until something broke in the Papago affair, to which he had secured himself a ringside seat, Thursday didn't know where to start looking for the ten IOU's. Back in his office after lunch he called the Telephone Secretarial Service to find out if Irene Whitney had phoned him that morning. She hadn't.

He made a few more calls—to an elderly manicurist, to a used car salesman who got around, to some others. These most close-mouthed of his contacts he set listening for the name of J. X. O'Connell.

The phone rang back at him about one-thirty. A feminine voice asked if he was Mr. Thursday. The voice was throatier than Irene Whitney's and more nervous. "I wanted to see you, but I—are you alone now, Mr. Thursday?"

"For a while. Who is this speaking?"

"I'm phoning from the lobby. If I come right up, may I talk to you?"

"Fourth floor. To the right." When she hung up, Thursday hastily dialed the cigar stand in the lobby. "Fred? There should be a female just coming out of the phone booths or waiting for an elevator. See her?"

Fred said, "You bet," and whistled softly.

"She alone?"

"Right now, yes. But ask her if she's got a friend, huh?"

"If she had a friend she wouldn't be coming here." Thursday hung up and put on his coat. When a trim auburn-haired girl timidly pushed open the glass door, he went to meet her, smiling courteously.

Fred had put across the right idea. The cut of her green suit meant money and the young body it complimented was worth dressing well. Her wide uncertain eyes picked up copper tints from her hair but the rest of her pale pure face was spiritually pretty, as if to deny the accidental fire in her gaze. To Thursday, the face looked vaguely familiar.

He took her elbow, found it trembling slightly, and steered her to the good chair, "I'm very glad to be able to help you, Miss—"

"Odler." She whispered it and then repeated it decisively. "Yvonne Odler."

Facing her across the desk, he said, "I thought I recognized you from the society sections. *The* Odler family, then?"

"Yes. Mr. Thursday, I wouldn't ever have come to you—except that I was told that you were absolutely trustworthy and—"

"Now who could have told you that?" He said it cordially but she didn't answer. "I suppose the Odlers have informational sources just as I do. Merchant princes, patrons of the arts—seriously, I'm happy to be known in that circle."

"You're not teasing?" she asked earnestly, leaning forward. "I don't know what you'll think after—I'm in pretty awful trouble."

"If it's any solace to you, Miss Odler, the trouble's usually not as awful as most people in that chair think it is." Pretending not to watch her too closely, he added quietly, "Start anywhere."

She sank white teeth into her full lower lip and gazed helplessly in his direction but seeming to see someone else. The teeth left a tiny dent when her mouth opened to say, "I'm being blackmailed."

Surprise jerked Thursday's head up. "Who's doing it?"

"I don't know," she spilled out quickly. "All I've ever heard him called is Abe. He's nearly as tall as you, only rather plumpish, not very healthy looking. He's completely—well, evil." She shuddered.

"What's he selling?"

The girl's face became a private scared mask again. "Can't you—must I tell you that?" Thursday nodded sympathetically but kept silent, letting her talk herself into telling him. "But I'd simply die if anybody found out about it. Yet, I suppose—you won't say anything to *anybody*, will you?"

"Miss Odler, I'm bound by some of the same ethics as your family doctor. A private detective who talked couldn't stay open a week."

SHE said, "Oh," indecisively. She stared down at her purse and wrinkled her forehead and the red color began to creep up from her throat. Finally, she nodded and murmured something to herself and opened the purse. Her delicate hand shook as it pushed a brown envelope halfway across the desktop.

Thursday opened the envelope, not looking at Yvonne Odler because she didn't want to be looked at. He took out six three-by-five photographs, glossy finish, and one photographic negative the same size. Silently, he inspected each picture. After he had held the negative up to the light, he slid everything back into the envelope and left it in the middle of the desk.

He sat back, stony-faced. When the girl glanced up, her eyes were wet. He asked, "Is that all?"

She didn't raise her burnished head. "No. Five other negatives."

"I mean, are these all the poses?"

"Oh, yes!"

"How'd it happen, Miss Odler? Tell me enough so I can fill in the gaps."

"I can't tell you why, why I did such a crazy thing. I suppose I'm not much good. But I swear I didn't know what I was getting into, really I didn't!" Her head stayed bowed. Her muffled voice sounded ready to go into hysteria!"

"Look at me!" Thursday commanded and her flushed face flew up, wondering. He said coldly, "Get this. It's none of my business what your character is like. My job is trouble-shooting, not repairing complexes. You don't have to apologize to me for a thing as long as I get paid for my work."

Yvonne Odler straightened her shoulders angrily and her transparent skin began to pale. Thursday grinned as she snapped out of it. She smiled back faintly and nodded her head in a sort of apology. "I forgot myself. Another sign that I'm merely a spoiled brat."

"Let's see if I can't reconstruct your luck for you," Thursday said. "Some time back you went to a party, mostly people you didn't know or didn't know very well. Among them was this Abe fellow. You all had a lot to drink, some of you moved on to a smaller, more select party—maybe you tried a hopped-up cigarette—and you were floating on top of the world. First thing you know you were playing artist's model just for the gag." He flicked the brown envelope with a fingernail. "The next morning all

you had were some foggy memories and a lousy headache. The headache didn't get really bad until Abe showed up—with his pictures. How close did I come?"

Yvonne was wide-eyed. She whispered, "You can't know—how do you—"

"Pretty old racket, almost formal by now. When did this happen?"

"Two weeks ago. Two weeks last Saturday."

"And the price?"

"A thousand dollars each. For each negative, I mean."

"You're getting off cheap. For an Odler, I'd say that five thousand per would be more like it."

"No, you don't understand," she said, tensing again. "My family—I couldn't stand for them to know. I've been paying out of my allowance."

"But you're out of allowance."

"I have the second thousand ready but, thinking ahead— That's why I came here. I've borrowed all I can from my friends. I've sold some clothes, what jewelry I dared to sell. Oh, if Daddy ever found out, he'd be furious!"

"So would the police department. Not with you. With Abe and anybody working with him. The cops keep secrets too, you know. They have some legal rights I don't have—like kicking a blackmailer around until he coughs up film."

As the girl caught on, her eyes began to brim again. But this time she turned her head to one side to touch her eyes with a lacy handkerchief. Then she sat up regally, her red young mouth tragic. "Please, Mr. Thursday. It's bad enough, it's chancy enough, telling you and you're just one person. The thought of other men seeing those pictures—I'd sooner kill myself, believe me."

"I believe you," Thursday said. "I just felt duty bound to inform you that this town does have a police department. Actually—" he rose and stepped to the bright window. He socked his right fist into his other palm viciously and after a moment turned back, smiling thinly—"I'd like a crack at Abe and company."

"Thank you," Yvonne said huskily. Impetuously, she came around the desk and clasped his big hand, it was still a fist, between her two small ones. "Oh, thank you! You can't know what this means to me."

"Uh-huh," agreed Thursday. "How does Abe contact you?"

"Tomorrow—tomorrow afternoon he said he'd come again. He usually comes about three. I thought if you could come a little earlier, then you could surprise him there. If he carries the negatives with him—"

"That's too much to hope for. I'll be there."

"I'm in the book. Sixth Avenue near Laurel." She paused uncertainly. "We haven't said anything about money, have we?"

"My fee is twenty-five dollars per day plus any unusual expenses. But I never take a fee in advance. I'll bill you afterwards, Miss Odler."

"Oh." She had her checkbook half out of her purse. "Well, if you prefer—but I'd be perfectly willing."

Thursday said, "I'll see you tomorrow then—a little before three."

The girl hesitated again, her eyes nervously remembering the brown envelope on his desk. "The pictures—I suppose it's safest to leave them here with you, isn't it?"

"Whatever you think."

"Oh, no! I didn't mean to distrust you—Mr. Thursday, lock them up somewhere, won't you? I couldn't stand the thought of—"

Thursday took up the envelope, crossed to the green metal filing cabinet and slipped the envelope into the top drawer. While Yvonne watched anxiously, he locked the case and raised his eyebrows at her. "Satisfied?"

"Completely." She held out a warm hand and smiled a little. She said goodby, that she'd see him tomorrow. Thursday watched her figure walk off down the hall on silken legs and he shook his head with guilty annoyance. Abe's pictures were insidious.

He shut his office door and locked himself in. Then he ambled back to the filing cabinet, got out his keys and unlocked it. For a long time, he leaned his elbows on its cold top, turning Yvonne Odler's brown envelope over in his hands. A sardonic smile had just begun to twist his mouth when the phone startled the quiet office.

Thursday answered it and Austin Clapp rumbled, "Hi. We just caught up with George Papago."

CHAPTER VII

TUESDAY, August 9, 2:30 p. m.——Detective Jim Crane, driving the unmarked police sedan, looked the coolest of the three men despite the well worn black suit. His narrow stooped shoulders moved effortlessly with the wheel and his hair gleamed over his reddish lined face like a snow cap. He hummed while beside him Lieutenant Clapp sweated and growled about needing some sleep.

Sprawled listlessly across the back seat, Max Thursday watched the boring scenery sail by, the sagebrush hills along the University Avenue extension. This back road led eventually to La Mesa, a foothills community ten miles east of San Diego.

Clapp said needlessly, "Right up ahead there, Jim," and Crane turned off under an arched rustic sign and rolled up a short gravel road that widened into a parking lot. The twig sign letters spelled out MOLYNEAUX ALLIGATOR FARM.

A motorcycle policeman roared off about his business as they slid in beside two black-and-white prowl cars. Bryan, a burly patrolman, got up off a running board and crunched toward them. "Lieutenant," he said in greeting and nodded to Crane and Thursday.

"We got a customer?" Clapp said.

Bryan jerked his head at the larger of two brown stucco imitations of haciendas which squatted by the parking lot. "That door by the postcard rack and the soda pop machine. It takes you through the administration building and on out back. He's back there on the path. The doc's there already." He watched the three men trudge on, then sat down again on the running board and wiped the sweat band of his khaki cap.

Thursday stopped to look at the twelve-foot alligator hide nailed above the doorway and then followed the other two into the administration building where it was cooler. Another door, with turnstile, opened at the rear and beside this was a ticket window, unattended. Sunk in the center of the broad concrete floor, under the skylight, were a pair of pens containing pools and sandy beaches. "The come-on," guessed Clapp, motioning toward the yellow-striped baby alligators. "Step outside for the big show."

As the three detectives walked by, some of the foot-long alligator pups set up a yapping noise and floundered into the water. Thursday nudged Crane and pointed at a glass display case of alligator wallets, belts, purses and watch straps. "From the cradle to the grave."

"Probably buy them ready-made," Crane said. "Ever try to skin an alligator?"

"No. And don't tell me you have."

The place was deserted. Clapp was already shoving his way through the reluctant turnstile. Fifty yards down the path that rambled through the walled grounds Thursday could see a knot of men, some uniformed.

The outdoor pools were giant replicas of the pup pens in the administration building. A hundred feet in diameter, they ranged on each side of the path, walled waist-high in brown adobe. Half of each enclosure was a shallow pond; big boulders and tropical shrubs studded the beach half. In every pen a dozen heavy-trunked alligators lay or the beaches or submerged in the

placid water. Their gross armored bodies sunned with no sign of breathing, like fallen statues, while their long jagged mouths grinned perpetual grins. Only the faint trails in the sand showed they were capable of movement.

"The babies had stripes." Crane frowned about it.

"Maybe they outgrow them," Thursday said. "You don't wear yours."

THE knot of men opened to absorb the three newcomers. The medical examiner, Stein, grimaced up at them from where he was kneeling beside the sprawled figure at his knees. The examiner was a small birdlike man with a dark intent face. "If you'd taken much longer," he welcomed Clapp, "I'd have had this thing solved for you."

"That'll be the day." Clapp kneeled briskly beside Stein and then hesitated, scowling painfully at the face-down dead man. Thursday knew the feeling, a sort of angry nausea. Clapp took hold of the head and shifted it on the folded towel so he could see the face. A moment's study and he twisted it back to its former position. He got up slowly and said, "Papago, all right," to Thursday.

It was George Papago but he bore little resemblance to the cocky elaborate dresser who had tricked Thursday the afternoon before. His body was completely nude. The exposed flesh was milk-white in contrast to the black hair. The slightly darker skin of his neck and hands which had been olive yesterday was now a pasty gray. The entire body looked boneless, shamefully helpless. The back of the head was matted with hair and a blackish crust.

Clapp broke his own silence. "Jim, better get on the phone and check his home right away." Crane left and the homicide chief looked at the cameraman who nodded. The print man spoke up, "Got the victim's. No surface worth playing with. Not in there." He gestured at the nearest alligator enclosure. Clapp glanced around the group and asked, "Find his clothes?"

A patrol car man said, "Searched the road a mile either way, both sides. Nothing, Lieutenant."

"Who found him? When and where?" Clapp's steely eyes fastened on the one stranger there, a lanky sunburnt man with a lantern jaw. He wore a checkered cap, white shirt and riding breeches and clutched a two-foot length of broomstick in his fist.

"My name's Long, Roy J. Long, Lieutenant," the lanky man drawled as he moved one faltering step nearer. "I'm keeper for these 'gators. I reckon I'm the one to tell you about it."

"Lieutenant Clapp—homicide. You the owner, Mr. Long?"

"No, sir, that's Mr. Molyneux. He isn't here right now. Mrs. Molyneux, his wife, you know she felt kind of sick and he took her up to the house to lie down." He stabbed his piece of broomstick toward the stucco structure beside the administration building. "They live in there. I can go get them if you—"

"Never mind, thanks. I can hear your story and then we'd like formal statements from all you people later on."

"I found him, whoever he is, I guess about an hour ago. He was in one of the pens. In with Prettyboy—the pen right there."

"An hour ago?" Clapp turned to Stein who was brushing off his knees. "He was killed last night, wasn't he?"

The medical examiner straightened, surprised. "You're getting on to my racket. My rough estimate was going to be fourteen to eighteen hours ago."

"Sapped?"

"Not exactly. At the moment I'd say a billy, lead pipe, jack handle, something like that. Not a blackjack. I'm pretty certain skull crushed by blunt instrument is cause of death. No other marks on him except some scratches on the left calf, both sides."

The cameraman cleared his throat. "Lieutenant, there's little or no blood on the sand over there where they said they found him. It looks like he got it somewhere else and somebody dumped him

over there after the blood had stopped flowing."

"There's some grit in the coagulation," Stein protested hotly. "The blood hadn't completely coagulated when the wound came into contact with the sand."

"Thanks, both of you," said Clapp and swung back to Roy Long. "It appears that the dead man has been here since last night, Mr. Long. How come you didn't notice him till an hour ago?"

Long smiled weakly. "That's what I was going to say, Lieutenant. He wasn't out in plain sight. Over behind some of the rocks." He pointed past the alligators in the pen at an open den of boulders at the far side. "I still wouldn't have found him except some fool sightseer stood up on the wall to take a picture and made some crack about how it took a lot of guts to sunbathe in with the crocodiles. The fool called them crocs. I hopped over to see and then—" He shrugged, glancing involuntarily at the body.

CLAPP sent a patrolman after a blanket to cover the body. Then he put Long through the story again. Then he had Long lead him around to where they could look over the wall and see where the body was found. One of the prowl cars left on a call and a moment later Clapp dismissed the other one.

Thursday had spent his time leaning against the wall listening but not butting into the homicide chief's routine. After another check with the camera and print men, Clapp sauntered over to lean beside him. Silently, the two looked at the somnolent alligators.

Clapp said, "Well, there passes one bright boy. Papago."

"Yeah. I've seen him around, could take him or leave him alone. Still makes you mad, whoever it is."

"I suppose he mixed in something too tricky, too cute even for him. This place is closed at night, all sound sleepers. From those couple of flakes of blood on the sand, I'd say he was dumped over the wall down here in plain sight and the alligators dragged him back to the rocks. Nasty thing to think about."

"Any sign of the car that brought him?"

"No. You saw the road outside. First of all, it's gravel and second, it's been driven over all day."

"You can't have everything. Think of the glory you'll get out of this one."

Clapp laughed hollowly. "I'd trade that for a little rest." He squinted his eyes in the glare.

Stein said, behind them, "You going to want anything else, Clapp, or can we get out of this sun?"

"Sorry," Clapp said, turning around. "Take him away any time. Stein, can I have the preliminary autopsy report by after dinner?"

"Well, slave driver, seeing that you asked me so politely—" The medical examiner waved a good-by and walked down the path, whistling.

"The point that bothers me," Thursday said, gazing at the blanketed shape still on the path, "is why? Why cart him in here, taking the chance of waking up the Molyneux family or Long, when there are so many deserted canyons handy?"

"Why not? Dandy place to lose a body—toss it in with a pack of hungry alligators—" Clapp broke off. "Yeah, I see what you mean. Nothing happened to the body, did it?"

"Maybe the killer figured the same way you did. If it worked it would beat our pal the ocean all hollow. It'd beat any method of body disposal except flushing it down the john."

Roy Long was lingering near them, just out of earshot, uncertain that he had been dismissed. He came forward eagerly when Clapp motioned to him. "Anything I can do, Lieutenant?"

"I thought these lizards ate meat."

"Reckon they do. Oh—I see." He grinned. "That's right, we feed them raw meat. First rate horsemeat and liver. We buy it right over there in La Mesa and just the best since gators can be mighty finicky. But they only eat

every two weeks and I fed them all yesterday. They wouldn't touch a bite today if I served them on a silver platter."

Clapp asked, "Are they too finicky for human meat? I always thought these things were man-eaters."

"Not a chance!" Long drawled. "Maybe out in the swamps if you riled one up, you might have trouble. But these gators are peace-loving creatures and most of them hatched right here. Only takes ten years to reach full growth."

Stubbornly, Clapp persisted. "They handled the body, scratched up his leg with their teeth."

"Only out of curiosity, Lieutenant. Lookee here." Long vaulted over the wall and tromped up to an alligator fifteen feet long. "This is Prettyboy," he called to his audience. "He's one that was born in the swamps and never got caged until he'd reached eight feet."

Clapp muttered, "I suppose he knows his business."

"I'm not going in after him," Thursday whispered back.

Long rattled his piece of broomstick along Prettyboy's serrated back. A second later the alligator's big golden eyes winked open. Long tapped the reptile's snout and backed away across the sand, stepping over sleeping hulks as he bumped into them. By the time he reached the wall, Prettyboy had gotten the idea. He hoisted his ponderous leathery body on spindly legs and trotted after the keeper. He moved at a pace that surprised Clapp and Thursday, until he'd reached Long's feet. There he planted his snout across the keeper's boot toes and lay down, eyes again closed.

Long grinned, disengaged his feet and leaped back over the wall. "See?" he said proudly. "I'd bet my savings they wouldn't nibble a man, dead or alive, unless I starved them a month or two. That trick I just pulled—you ought to see the tourists go for it."

[*Turn page*]

oh-oh, Dry Scalp!
"... IMAGINE ME dancing with a scarecrow! How can he be so careless about his hair? It's straggly, unkempt, and . . . Oh-oh—loose dandruff! He's got Dry Scalp, all right. He needs 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic."
Hair looks better... scalp feels better... when you check Dry Scalp
Vaseline HAIR TONIC
HE TOOK HER TIP, and look at his hair now! 'Vaseline' Hair Tonic can do as much for you. Just a few drops a day check loose dandruff . . . keep hair naturally good-looking. It contains no alcohol or other drying ingredients. Gives double care to both scalp and hair . . . and it's economical, too!
TRADE MARK
starring JEAN HERSHOLT,
CBS Wednesday nights.
VASELINE is the registered trade mark of the Chesebrough Mfg. Co., Cons'd

As if in agreement, Prettyboy opened his jaws nearly to his eye-sockets, showing off a pink cavern rimmed with pointed teeth. He roared lustily, a booming note like a bass steam whistle.

"Smartest bull I ever seen," Long said when he could be heard.

"You bet." Thursday smiled at Clapp who was twisting a forefinger in or ear. "Well, Clapp, your killer doesn't know any more about alligators than we do. That narrows the field down a lot."

"Oh, sure. Like finding out he had two eyes. Come on—let's go back to that office. I feel a headache coming on."

"The sun or the case?"

"Two guesses."

Going up the path, they were hailed by Jim Crane. "Just heard, Austin. The D.A.'s on his way out."

"Fine medicine," Clapp said sourly.

CHAPTER VIII

TUESDAY, August 9, 3:30 p. m.——They heard the ambulance arrive out front as they strolled toward the rear ticket entrance of the administration building. Crane was ticking off items on his fingers. "I broke it to Papago's woman, this Nell Kopke, but she didn't have any thing to add. Papago went out yesterday afternoon and just never came home. She still doesn't know where, she says."

"Any visitors or phone calls beforehand?" Clapp asked.

Thursday looked away, toward the stretcher bearers advancing down the path, his hands chilled by a fleeting premonition. But he heard Crane's voice say, "No," and his shoulders relaxed a trifle. The white-haired detective added, "I doubt if she'll ever let on, anyway, not to us. She isn't putting herself out any to be nice. Not to a cop."

"We'll try gentling her later," said Clapp. "Meantime, I want you to pull in this fellow Vespasian I told you about—Max, you got his address handy?" Thursday rattled it off. "He's just a cheap chisler—scare him all you want. But get that silly story of his a dozen times over, now that it means what it does."

Crane nodded. "I'll grab a ride in with Stein. And Papago." He went on out the front door to the ambulance, leaving Clapp and Thursday alone in the administration building. The alligator pups began barking and floundering once more.

Clapp tried to cheer himself up. "Maybe this thing isn't as goofed up as it looks. Suppose your Vespasian and Papago's woman were two-timing George and he caught on. Or for that matter—"

"I don't know about that," Thursday said slowly. He felt responsible for dragging Vespasian this close to the fire. Still, he sensed that the fortune teller was implicated to some unknown degree. "I just don't think that little operator could hit as hard as Papago was hit."

"Maybe not. But I've seen that woman and she could. She's the athletic type. Besides, any weakling can do wonders with a lead pipe."

"Too simple for this case. Papago might have welshed on a bet or tried to foreclose some old IOUs. Or something."

"If it had been gambling trouble, we'd have found him in that canyon you mentioned. But you're right in a way, Max. Just not my luck to draw down a simple one—especially with you around."

"Benedict losing his prize fish a week before the trial—he'll go for the gambling angle. I'll give you five to one on that as long as you don't mention I think so, too."

"Speak of the devil," murmured Clapp. Thursday looked out the door. The police ambulance was just rolling out the gravel driveway as a dark green Cadillac sedan turned in. The Cadillac parked next to Clapp's car and two men got out. "No bet," Clapp added and went

to the door to wave a hand at Leslie Benedict.

THE district attorney of San Diego marched up to the administration building as if on parade. He never meant to act officious, for he was too precise a man to show off, but the bearing of his lean erect body always seemed too correct to be true. He had only just passed forty and he was not an ugly man. But the smooth regularity of his deeply tanned short-mouthed face gave him the cool appearance of an egg. In all published photographs he wore a hat to break this symmetry, the only political trick Benedict ever stooped to. The press of his blue suit, the knot of his tie, the high gloss of his shoes—as always, Thursday felt unshaven and sloppy next to Leslie Benedict.

Ed Wales, the one-man brigade Benedict led, tried to be like him. He was a big young man, a bright young man with rimless spectacles and an insincere smile.

Clapp said to Thursday, "Favor to me, Max—go send Long in here, will you?"

Thursday grinned, understanding, and pushed through the turnstile with no more than one chilly glance from Benedict's yellowish eyes. He sent Roy Long in to Clapp and loafed around on the path, smoking a cigarette and avoiding the area where the dead gambler had lain. Clapp was right, he reflected. No one hanging around as if he were eavesdropping on official business. On the other hand, he didn't want to skulk out here in the sun and give Benedict the idea he was afraid of him. After five minutes of consideration, Thursday decided to rejoin the forces of law but keep his mouth discreetly shut.

"By tomorrow morning I'd like to read over the statements of everyone on these premises," Benedict was telling Clapp. "The owners and Mr. Long, and I understand there are some Mexicans who work here during the day, also."

"I gave them a half day off when this trouble came up," Long drawled. "I reckoned we'd best shut down for the afternoon, at least. But those boys didn't see anything or they'd have put up a holler."

Ed Wales sidled up to Thursday. "Hello, Max," he said, voice muted so as not to bother his superior. "What are you doing out here?"

"I've been expecting that question from your boss, too."

Wales shook his head, deeply worried. He whispered, "He doesn't show it, of course, but he's upset. You can't blame him, losing Papago just on the eve, as it were. I imagine somebody didn't want Papago to come to trial."

"That what Benedict figures, too, Ed?"

"What's more likely?"

Thursday didn't answer.

Benedict swung his impersonal gaze around the group. "Let me sum up," he said didactically. "George Papago was murdered between nine o'clock last night and one o'clock this morning by person or persons unknown. Place unknown. Murder weapon unknown but presumed to be a bludgeon of some sort. The victim's clothes and personal articles were stolen or destroyed. Papago's body was placed in one of the alligator pens in the hope that the reptiles would consume it and destroy all traces of the crime. Have I stated the facts correctly?"

Then Thursday said, "No," flatly.

It had slipped out but when he saw the shocked look on Wales's face, he knew he was going to defend his hunch. Benedict didn't register any emotion but behind his back Clapp grimaced.

Thursday said, "The killer didn't expect the alligators to gollup down Papago. Maybe he wanted it to look that way but that wasn't the main reason. What he really wanted was to make sure Papago's death got a good spread, a big splash."

Now Clapp looked interested. "You mean as a warning to somebody. Who?"

"I don't know. But I do know this—tomorrow there won't be a newspaper

reader in Southern California who won't know about Papago. Just because of the alligator angle."

Clapp chewed his lip, thinking that one over. But Benedict, whose eyes had not left Thursday's since the blunt interruption, spoke deliberately. "That idea's certainly worth consideration, Thursday. I'm glad you happen to be here as an expert on the press and their sensational handling of crime news." Thursday smiled back at him wryly, knowing what would come next. "And that brings up a point which I had refrained from mentioning. How do you happen to be here?"

"He came out with me," Clapp said. "Max turned up a piece of this case. That Vespasian. Naturally, he's interested."

"Indeed? But I can't understand his position in an official investigation. In fact, Lieutenant, I've never been able to understand Thursday's semi-official standing with your department, particularly in view of his record and his methods."

CLAPP'S heavy face reddened and he jammed his hands in his coat pockets. "Mr. Benedict, I run my outfit my way. Knowing Max, I take a slightly different view of said record and methods and that doesn't mean I condone anything either. So if you want to file a complaint, I'm sure my chief will read it."

"Not at all," Leslie Benedict said decisively. "I'm expressing the opinion of my office but only to you since I see no cause yet for formal complaint. However, I will add this—" he took a half-turn toward Thursday—"I don't intend to abide your interference in my work, Thursday. If necessary, I'll have you detained for obstructing justice. Is my view clear?"

"Les," said Thursday amiably, "you keep up that kind of talk and you're going to antagonize me."

Wales began with, "Now see here," but couldn't think how to finish. Benedict merely let fall, like a theater curtain, a look of cool amusement across his face.

A car squealed to a halt on the gravel outside. "Reporters," Clapp said. "All in Osborn's car." He added, "Max, would you—"

"Sure." Thursday grinned briefly and went outdoors. He boiled inside because he had acted like a child and Benedict had squelched him like one. He wondered why the D.A. always brought out his impulsive worst. Two entirely different men, yes, but both working to the same end.

The three men and the woman who got out of Osborn's Ford surrounded him with questions. He said, "Don't know from nothing. The big boys will see you in a second." They still wanted to chatter but he shouldered by them and went on out to Clapp's car.

Merle Osborn trailed after him. A tall brusque young woman, she could be handsome when she put forth the effort. Today she wore her usual mannish suit of gray worsted, one button missing, and flat-heeled shoes. During the man shortage, she had been promoted to the police beat, an important post on the lurid *Sentinel,* and she had been good enough to keep it since.

She caught up with Thursday, her bright round eyes looked him up and down, and she said, "Temper, my boy. *You* didn't have a flat coming out here. And those other three lugs were about as much help as—"

Thursday grinned toothily to please her. "I tried to call you after lunch. Ever heard of anybody using the name J. X. O'Connell? Phony lawyer."

"No. I'll listen, though. What's your connection with this present turmoil?"

"Honey, I wish I knew."

"Okay, lie to me."

He poked back into place a strand of brown hair that had slipped out of her severe coiffure. "Now don't act hurt. You know you'll get it first, lies and all."

Merle squeezed his hand unobtrusively. "Your subtle consideration, that's

why I can't resist you." He shrugged and she said, "Tomorrow's my night off. Time was I didn't have to remind you."

"I'll be there." Clapp signaled from the doorway and Thursday gave her a little shove. "Now earn your pay." She smiled back at him as she caught up with the other reporters filing into the administration building.

Thursday clambered into the back seat of the police sedan and lit a cigarette. He reviewed his glimpses of the long fuse that had finally exploded into the Papago killing. He wondered how soon he could pass his tiny store of information on to Clapp without jeopardizing his client. He also wondered if Clapp was keeping anything back from him. And finally, he was almost dozing, gazing sleepily at the road that led by the Molyneux Alligator Farm.

A blue Buick convertible slowed and he thought it was going to turn up the driveway. But the driver was merely staring curiously. At what, Thursday couldn't figure. Everybody but him was inside out of sight. Of course the three cars on the parking lot—Clapp's, Benedict's, Osborn's—all were unmarked and unnotable.

Yet the driver of the convertible stared as if she already knew this was the scene of murder. Then Thursday sat up hastily as he recognized the woman driver and, seeing him, Irene Whitney sped her blue convertible swiftly on towards La Mesa.

CHAPTER IX

WEDNESDAY, August 10, 9:30 a. m.——Nell Kopke sat across Thursday's desk from him, one arm around the homely Georgie who played with the zipper on her purse. She wasn't drunk but she had cloves on her breath. The morning light was unkind to her drawn face.

Thursday said, "I know how tough it is on both of you. They'll do all they can."

"But that don't bring George back," she said bitterly. "I guess I surprise you, huh? After being out at the house yesterday, I mean. Well, I loved him, never mind how we talked. We always figured someday—" She broke off to hug the little boy to her roughly. "Now poor Georgie hasn't got any father at all."

Georgie sucked his thumb through the embrace while his great eyes pondered the detective. Thursday rephrased what he had been saying for ten minutes. "Well, I know absolutely they'll find out who did it. I realized how little comfort—"

"Cops!" Her sensual mouth narrowed scornfully. "I don't need their help."

"They'll give it, though. They don't like this, either."

"They don't see the same way I do. I'll take care of this myself. For Georgie's sake. That's the way he'd have wanted it."

"No, it seems to me that George would have liked you to stay out of trouble. Because of the kid."

Nell's dull eyes raked him boldly. "You want me to just sit and chew my tongue, huh?"

He kept from pointing out that Papago wouldn't be in the police morgue now if he had done more of that. He got up from the swivel chair to stretch his legs, wondering if anything valuable was to be gotten from her. Probably not, because the gambler hadn't been killed in connection with his usual business. He felt sure of that and, anyway, Clapp and Benedict would have that obvious channel dragged and dredged.

"I thought so," Nell spoke up accusingly and then went back to brooding. Georgie skipped over to the window to peep at the dizzy distance down. She said, "I didn't tell the cops you were out to the house yesterday, you know."

"I know. Thanks."

"You want to know why?"

"Because you haven't been telling the cops anything."

Thursday turned to the wallmap behind his desk. It was a huge map of the city, mounted on heavy beaverboard, which was intended to give clients the idea he had the whole town at his fingertips. Just the contrast between this woman and that started his mind working over Irene Whitney. All he knew of his client was her looks and her car. He ran his forefinger from La Mesa on the map down to the alligator farm.

"No, that wasn't why," Nell said shakily. Behind him, he heard her purse zip open and he wondered if she was getting out a handkerchief to cry into. Then her voice went up, "Because I wanted to do this myself!"

He started to turn just as the office rocked with an explosion and a small cyclone rushed over his head. Thursday spun around his desk in a crouch and dove into the woman.

Georgie turned, and started to cry. The impact between Thursday and the woman was solid; Nell was tall and husky. At the instant of collision he noticed she was trembling violently, then he broke away from her with her little revolver safe in his hand.

She didn't try to run. She stood flat-footed, her wide-apart eyes glaring defiantly. Thursday said, "You're going to talk to the cops now, like it or not."

"You'll never turn me in," Nell said sullenly. "You do and I'll tell what I know."

THURSDAY smiled bleakly. "Guess again, honey. I'm not behind any eight-ball in this business. For professional reasons, I'd just as soon not mix with it, but I didn't kill George. That's the crazy idea you got in mind, isn't it?"

The animal glow began to die in her eyes. Finally, the first doubt flickered across her broad face. "But I thought—"

"I'll tell you something, Nell, you should have learned by now. You're not the kind of woman who ought to think. No, I'm not mad because I know how upset you are. But don't try thinking because you're not good at it."

Somehow, obscurely, that reminded her of her appearance. She straightened her dress over her figure and made certain her long hair was lying properly down her back.

Thursday sighed and went to the window. Below, in front of the Moulton Building, a prowl car had jerked to a stop. "Somebody reported the shot. We're going to have cops."

Nell began to look frightened and he felt sorry for her. She gathered Georgie and her purse, looked around for a closet, and didn't see one. "I'll go some place," she said uncertainly and headed for the door.

Thursday grabbed her arm. "That won't do. That hall will be lined with people looking out doors. Can you keep the kid quiet for five minutes?"

"Sure. You'll keep shut up, won't you, precious—if Mommy tells you to?"

Georgie dug his fists into his eyes and nodded his head.

"The desk," Thursday said. He led her and the youngster around behind it. Between the two columns of drawers, the knee-space was a small wooden cave, hidden from anyone not sitting in the swivel chair. Thursday had Georgie crawl in first. He knelt and whispered to him, "Now this is a game, kid. You and Mommy hide here, and don't make any noise at all. You do it right and I'll buy you an ice-cream cone. Okay?"

The youngster looked out at him blankly. Nell repeated the instructions and got into the cramped space beside him. Thursday sat down in his swivel chair and wheeled as close to the desk as he could, until his knees were tight against the woman's warm side. He got a rag out of the bottom drawer. He dumped the cartridges from the cylinder and was making a pretense of cleaning the gun when a hand tried the door.

The prowl car man was named Hoover and Thursday knew him from a shoplifting case two months before. Hoover said, "Hi, sorry to—" He broke off and came in, shutting out the buzz in the hall. "Maybe we found it, huh?"

"How are you, Hoover," Thursday said and grinned foolishly. "I just pulled a dumb fool stunt. I was hoping nobody noticed."

"Noticed!" Hoover snorted and came over to look at the short blue-steel Colt. "Report we got was that a bomb went off. Cleaning accident?"

"Yeah. Overlooked one that nearly took my head off."

"Where'd it go?"

Thursday got up and showed him on the map. In the green square that represented Balboa Park, there was a small hole drilled into the beaverboard.

For a second, Hoover looked interested enough to come behind the desk and inspect the bullet hole which almost blended into the map. But he got out his report book instead. He wrote a few lines, then glanced up, pencil poised. "Got a permit for that .32, haven't you, Thursday? Not that you're carrying it this minute but—"

"Sure," Thursday lied. "I may be dumb enough to part my hair with the thing but I'm not that dumb."

Hoover put his book away and grinned. "Well, consider yourself warned. Hope you're still alive next time I see you."

After he had gone, Thursday waited a full minute before he told the pair under the desk it was safe. George wriggled free first. "I want a double-decker, chocolate and strawberry. That costs a dime."

Thursday gave him a dime.

"I did good, didn't I? I wanted to sneeze but I didn't." He laboriously buttoned the coin into his pocket and ran back to the window.

THURSDAY said, "I wonder how good I did." He regarded Nell who was again smoothing her dress over the fullness of her body. She stopped in the process, gave him an obstinate look and continued preening. He said, "Maybe I should have let the cops have you."

"All right, so I owe you something."

"Why do you think I killed George?"

"You killed some other people once."

"Most people don't remember two years back."

"George told me."

"Well, don't let people put ideas in your head. The cops don't think your own alibi for Monday night is very hot."

"You know that's not true," Nell said stubbornly. "I went over to some friends and we played pinochle. The cops say they won't bother me any more."

"I was just asking. Oh, well." Thursday sat down and extended his legs under the desk luxuriously. "Nell, I didn't kill George, I didn't have a thing against him and I don't know who did. I'm working on the same business George was when it happened. So I may find out, especially if I can get a little cooperation from you. That includes not taking potshots at me."

"You don't know how lucky you really are. I'm a terrific shot as a rule. That gun must be off or something."

She seemed to take some sort of simple pride in her shooting which was as awkward as her thinking. Thursday reflected that she probably regarded herself as quite a brain. He said, "How about it? Do we cooperate and help George together?"

"Okay, I guess so," Nell said slowly. "Just what is it you want me to do, huh?"

"The first thing is not to excite the cops. You're more important out of jail than in." Thursday reeled off the flattery, ready to say anything that would keep her out of his hair. "The best thing would be to stay home and think. Think of everything George said and did in the last few days. Whatever seems not quite right, why, you call me up and tell me. I'll keep a record up here and pretty soon we may stumble onto something. It's because you're valuable that way that I didn't throw you to the cops."

"Oh," she said and looked surprised. "Can I have my gun back? George gave it to me."

"All right," Thursday said. He handed her the .32 and then its ammunition,

just in case. But Nell dropped the Colt in her purse without reloading, called Georgie and took his hand.

"I'll call you as soon as I think of something," she promised. From the door she asked, "Was that really why you didn't turn me in?"

"What else?"

"I figured it was so you could make a pass at me."

Mother and child departed, leaving Max Thursday a whole new line of thought.

CHAPTER X

WEDNESDAY, August 10, 10:30 a. m.—— Clapp wasn't around headquarters when Thursday phoned so he thumbed to the L section of the directory and made some check-up calls. Then he drove down Broadway to the waterfront and around the curve of the harbor to the Westgate Sea Products Company.

Here, in the tuna cannery, he ran down Rosa Lalli. She existed, which seemed to bear out Vespasian's tale of that corner of his career. She was a dark buxom girl with a pretty sheeplike face whom a foreman brought up front from the packing belt. Thursday asked a few vague questions regarding a mythical insurance claim and departed without worrying anybody. His estimate amused him that the ubiquitous gallant, Vespasian, was about as high as his light of love's chin.

Going round by the foot of Market Street, he spotted Clapp's broad back turning into the tiny corner cafe opposite the police station.

"Not much new," Clapp admitted when Thursday slid onto the stool next to him. "Traffic bunch picked up Papago's car this morning a couple blocks from the post office. Overparking. There's some blood dried onto the right-hand side of the front seat so that's evidently where the Greek got his."

"You think the killer carted Papago out to the alligator farm in his own car and then brought it back?"

"Good a way to figure as any."

"Prints?"

Clapp grunted. "You know better than that. Fingerprints have been publicized so much it's the first thing your average murderer thinks about."

"That's a neat concept, Clapp, the average murderer. You're getting bitter."

"Well, this coffee doesn't help much." Clapp made a nauseated face at his cup. "Personally, I'm thanking my lucky stars for that carhop knifing night before last. Makes us look good and gives the papers something juicy to chew on. That way they don't ride us so much." He snickered disgustedly. "Boy, how's that for ill winds!"

"You're forgiven. What about Papago's clothes?"

"Nothing yet, maybe never. But, unless it's something exceptional, clothes are mainly identification and we don't need that here. We all know it's Papago."

"Well . . . maybe it was having to get rid of the clothes that gave the killer the idea of making a warning out of Papago's body."

"Name it and you can have it."

Thursday's own coffee came. He sipped it and shuddered. "I remember reading about a case up in San Berdoo a few years back. Victim's clothes were destroyed, not because of identification, but to cover up. The killer wanted to get rid of a wallet and he figured if all the clothes were missing nobody'd think about the wallet—or what might be in it."

"Don't remember this one. Did they?"

"No. It came out later, after they'd caught their man. This wallet—" Thursday heard the limb creak as he climbed farther out on it—"contained a calling card, presence of same being known to the victim's wife. The name on it was a phony but the printing could have been traced."

"Printers don't keep much record of little jobs like calling cards," Clapp objected. "Of course, if the phony had distinguished himself at the time of purchase, like an argument over price or something—"

"Well, the card was important to the killer for some reason like that. The point is that the card's absence from the wallet might have been noticed. But what did the card matter when everything was missing?"

"Um," said Clapp. "More coffee?"

"This is more than enough. Well, I just thought I'd mention it."

CLAPP wasn't too interested. He said instead, "I been out with Jim and a pair of the boys trying to get a line on what Papago was up to Monday night. Ever spend your mornings in bars? You sure meet some droll customers."

"Dig up anything?"

"Clocked Papago's final rounds practically to the minute." Clapp shook his head. "What a capacity that Greek had! Eleven different saloons sold him a drink or two."

"He sounds more like a gypsy. What does anybody do in eleven different bars?"

"From the way it sounds he was dodging somebody."

In the cup Thursday held, the coffee sloshed slightly. Then he drained the black acid and set it down. "Know who?"

"Yes and no. Come on, let's make a break for it." Clapp paid both checks, brushed aside Thursday's nickel and lumbered out into the sunlight.

The two big men teetered on the curb, while the Market Street traffic rushed by them.

Thursday waited for Clapp to speak. When it appeared that the homicide chief was going to continue frowning at the hot asphalt, he prompted, "Are you going to tell me, Lieutenant, or aren't you?"

"Oh, yeah." Clapp had been off somewhere else. "There's this nice little bar near the Fremont. McCloskey's Shining Hour. That's where Papago ended up before his date with the alligators. He was sitting there at one of the tables having a drink with a gray-haired fellow when the guy who had been chasing him came along."

"And?"

"The stranger—call him the killer if you want—took Papago away with him. The gray-haired chap went out about the same time." Clapp dusted his hands together. "Scratch Papago."

Thursday said, "You got witnesses for all this, Clapp?"

Clapp snorted. "You think I'm making it up? Sure, I got witnesses. Plenty. They're vague as usual on some of the details, time and so on, but their stories'll hold up. If and when."

"How about the gray-haired man?"

"Got a fair description of him. Tall, good clothes, mustache, stick, man of distinction stuff. We'll publicize it, get him to come in. A little luck and he'll be able to put the finger right on the killer for us."

Thursday knew the crazy answer but he put the question anyway. "And how about this mysterious stranger who chased Papago around town and took him away? What's he look like?"

"Not too much to go on there. McCloskey's barkeep knew the gray-haired man by sight and Papago from the papers lately. But the stranger was a new man. Tall and thin and dark. That'll fit a lot of men."

"Even me," Thursday agreed.

"Well, if I thought you were wasting your youth in bars—" said Clapp, mock-serious. "At any rate, this raises the stock of your friend Vespasian quite a bit. He may be a latter-day alchemist but I don't think he could stretch out to that description. Happy?" He started across the street.

Thursday waved so-long and called, "Frankly, I got better men to worry about than that sneaker." First on his list was himself.

CHAPTER XI

WEDNESDAY, August 10, 2:30 p.m.——After a grouchy lunch in a rear booth at the Saddlerock Grill, Thursday kicked around his office awhile, brooding over the fallibility of witnesses and mankind in general. He was not surprised to be remembered by the bartenders. But he hadn't counted on being tabbed as the man who had taken George Papago away. By sheer human vagary, the shadowy O'Connell had gotten safely lost somewhere in the middle.

There was one grimly cheering aspect to his entire future. This afternoon he hoped to close with somebody tangible at Yvonne Odler's place. Thursday cracked his knuckles in anticipation.

At two-thirty precisely he parked his gray Oldsmobile alongside the sunny lawns of Balboa Park and strode across Sixth Avenue. The Devonshire was a late California building of stucco and glazed tile and glass brick, U-shaped around an orderly jungle of patio. All apartments on both stories opened onto the patio.

Thursday ran down the names by the mailboxes, found Odler listed as 2A, went up to the encircling balcony and knocked on her door.

"Mr. Thursday, I'm glad you're early. I've been worrying about—you know." He smiled back at her warm just-woke-up smile that seemed to establish a bond between them. The rest of Yvonne was all white flesh and copper. There were coppery tones in her hair and lashes and sandals and in the stark sheath of metallic negligee.

Thursday said, "Don't worry," and stepped into her deep carpet. A record-player was making languid music. Yvonne took his hat and bumped the door shut with her shoulder and he followed her cloud of perfume across the living room.

The room was big and bright-walled, an odd background for the girl's face which belonged in a church choir. The furniture was built in outlandish angular shapes as if the designer was jaded with the ordinariness of life. The paintings were abstracts in shouting purples and yellows and greens. Queer twisted statuettes guarded each end of the too-wide divan. The trapezoid block that represented a coffee table bore a lavish tray of salty-looking hors d'oeuvres and a long-necked bottle of yellow chartreuse.

"Please," Yvonne murmured, offering him the room. She sat down in the middle of the divan, had a blushing accident with the slit hem of her negligee and opened the bottle. "I thought I'd make your visit as pleasant as possible, Mr. . . . well, since you've caught me deshabille, I'd might as well call you Max, hadn't I? Or don't you ever mix business and pleasure, Max?"

"My business is my pleasure, Miss Odler."

"How courtly! And something to drink to." She leaned forward to fill the two cordial glasses and Thursday kept an eye on her bent head as he transferred his fountain pen from his shirt pocket to his right-hand coat pocket.

Yvonne rose with the two brimming yellow glasses. "Guaranteed to make you forget the weather," she said softly.

Thursday turned his back on her and walked over to attach the night-chain on the door. He heard Yvonne sigh, "Why, Max . . ."

He returned to her and took one of the glasses. She tilted her face to look up at him. She whispered, "Please take me seriously. I've remembered nothing but you since yesterday. You weren't what I expected." Her eyes got wider as she drifted closer until their bodies were touching gently.

"Thank you," Thursday said. He put an arm around her neck and poured his glass of chartreuse down her back.

Yvonne sprang away, horrified. Her own drink tumbled on the carpet and she

clutched herself. "Max! Why did you do that?"

Thursday put his hand in his coat pocket and shoved the barrel of the fountain pen forward against the lining. He grinned maliciously. "I don't drink."

As she retreated before him, the spiritual look ebbed from her face until she was a hot-eyed young imp. Her new hateful face couldn't believe the shape of his coat pocket.

Thursday said, "If you think it's my fountain pen, take a chance. Go ahead and try to warn him."

She licked her lips and said weakly, "I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sure not." He caught up with her behind the divan, spun her around and jabbed her sticky back with the concealed pen. "March, honey. And be a mighty good girl."

SHE began a protest but he jabbed her again and she submitted. They opened a door into a dim hallway with three more doors. The kitchen was empty and so was the bathroom. At the third door, Yvonne tried to turn around but Thursday opened the door himself and kneed her roughly into the bedroom.

Most of the room was a low cushiony bed. The decor was even more pagan than the living room and mirrored. Beside the dressing table, a tall man in shirt sleeves was taking a swig from a pint whisky bottle.

It wasn't J. X O'Connell; Thursday felt a twinge of disappointment at that. The stranger was tall enough but he was a puffy young man with mousy hair and big ears. His straw hat and plaid coat were thrown carelessly across the bed beside the black case of a Speed Graphic camera.

He and Thursday looked at each other for a moment. His Adam's apple moved twice before any words came out and then his voice was cracked. "What are you doing here?"

Yvonne dodged away from Thursday but not between the two men. "Abe! He's come back the way I said he would! Don't let him touch me, please!"

Abe blinked from Yvonne to the implacable Thursday and tried to look mean. "Kind of caught you red-handed this time, didn't I, mister? You think I'm going to stand for you annoying my wife the way you've—"

"Shut up," Thursday advised.

Abe closed his mouth and eyed the girl helplessly. Thursday sat down on the bed and took his hand out of his pocket since Abe wasn't going to be much to handle. He told Abe, "Now let's face facts, not play house. You're lucky you're not married to this tramp. You're that lucky, anyway."

Yvonne spat out a phrase.

"Now you're talking to me like you mean it." Thursday picked up the Speed Graphic. The metal tag riveted to the case read *Property of Don Kerner Photo Studio.*

"I just rented the camera there," Abe said quickly. "I was going to take some pictures this afternoon in the park."

Thursday laughed appreciatively. Then he ducked. He snaked out an arm in time to block the hand mirror Yvonne intended to axe him with. He knocked the mirror from her hand and held her easily at arm's length while she kicked and swore at him until she was tired.

"Back to the living room," Thursday ordered. "I don't like these parties where the guests wind up in the bedroom."

He herded them out to the divan and sat down. He pulled up a weird chair and faced them across the coffee table. "Let's have a drink," he suggested.

Some hope came into Yvonne's eyes and she smiled tentatively. "That's the first truly sensible thing you've said."

"Not me, Yvonne. Just you and Abe." He chuckled. "I've sworn off, didn't I tell you? Particularly off mickeys."

"Please let me tell you, Max," Yvonne begged. She leaned forward earnestly, careless of her negligee again, and her

lower lip quivered. "I know I have no right to the sympathy of a decent person. But, Max, he made me do it! He forced me! He threatened me with all sorts of terrible things if I didn't help him."

Thursday asked Abe, "How does it feel to be thrown to the wolves?"

Yvonne slipped down to the carpet on her knees and began crying. "Don't you believe me? I need your help—oh, so desperately, Max! Get me away from these people, oh, please!"

"You'll never need anybody's help—not with an act like that. Now drink your drink and let's get chummy." He collected the two glasses and filled them while Yvonne cursed him without a break or repetition for a full thirty seconds. Then he said calmly, "The drink."

She got back up on the divan defiantly and downed the glass of chartreuse. One glance from Thursday and the flabby photographer followed suit. Thursday said, "This is shaping up rough for you two. Especially you, Abe—you don't have the Odler connections."

"I don't know a thing you mean," Abe muttered.

"Are you dumber than I think you are? You just heard her try to make you the fall guy. That's just a sample of what lies ahead. Of course, you know how to make it easier on yourself."

There was an instant of silence while Abe sneaked a look sideways at the girl. She said viciously, "You listen to him, fat boy, and you know what'll happen to you."

Abe's mouth worked. "I don't know a thing you mean," he repeated to Thursday.

THURSDAY shrugged and refilled their glasses and made them drink again. He said, "Then let me tell you. Yvonne's tale of woe yesterday stuck in my throat. Kind of coincidental that two similarly persecuted women should decide to talk to the same private cop. I was expecting this layout this afternoon. I didn't even check your story, Yvonne, your bank withdrawals or anything. I wanted to walk into this today as a big enterprising sucker. I wanted you to keep this simple. Oh, you're just a piker in the setup, Abe. But I can imagine Yvonne is a pretty important member of the crew."

Yvonne bit her lip, trying to figure what he knew and how much.

"You know exactly who I'm talking about, don't you, honey? The blackmail crew that's gotten organized in this town. You're a member and J. X. O'Connell is a member. Who else?"

"You're insane," Yvonne said. "I'm an Odler. You can check that. Why would I—?"

"Because you're also a slut and you get your kicks out of the business. Like those girlish pictures you gave me yesterday to warm my heart. Or were those to get money out of your own folks? Anyhow, you're a high society hooker, honey. A priceless asset for your bunch because you circulate where there's pay dirt. And where there isn't any, you create it with your sweet face and your hot body and your stinking little soul." Thursday slopped her glass full again and snapped, "Drink! I'm getting ready to throw up just looking at you."

Her eyes watched him steadily over the glass rim. He said between his teeth, "I guess I'm losing my temper. I don't like you people making money off other people's mistakes. And I don't like you digging pits so mistakes can be made. Now you've learned something, that a dumb private cop named Thursday is starting to nose around and he might be dangerous. Dangerous because he's unpredictable and because he's lucky in such matters."

Even with the anger he was working up, he had to laugh inwardly at his boasting. But he knew the word about him was getting around, and if he could make the word a little frightening so much the better.

"You conceited ass," Yvonne said. Her voice was getting mushy. "You don't know what you're getting into."

"Don't kid yourself. I know and that's why I'm coming. Monday night your people tried to warn me off with Papago's hat. But I don't scare that easy. So they figured to give me Treatment B—the frame—and tie me up that way. That hasn't worked so well, either."

Abe keeled over on the divan. Yvonne's head was lolling on her chest. Thursday reached across the coffee table and held her chin up. He looked into her flickering eyes and spoke softly, on the chance that the loaded chartreuse had lowered her guard. "Somewhere in this town is the stuff that your people sell back to the others. There's part of that material I want. Where's it kept?"

Yvonne tried to focus.

Thursday said, "Your people keep it locked up somewhere. Where? In a bank box or somebody's house? Who has the key?"

The girl's eyes wobbled and then got him in range. She drooled as she tried to spit at him.

Thursday stood up. "Okay. When you come out of this, tell your boss something for me. Tell your boss I'm coming after a handful of paper, and if I have to tear up your business to get it, that won't break my heart. Got that?"

Yvonne got her drowsy head erect. "I got it," she slurred. "You wait."

She slid forward onto the floor, a sprawl of copper material and white legs. Thursday examined her eyes and then Abe's to make certain. Then he swiftly searched the apartment, removing his fingerprints as he went.

The place was clean, no address books, no diaries. All he found applicable were some more pictures of Yvonne and a notation in what was probably her handwriting on the telephone pad. The notation was two words: *Call Irene.*

Back in the living room, Thursday frowned over the prostrate forms of Abe and the girl. Then a cruel smile twitched at his mouth. He got to work again.

He took the chartreuse bottle out to the kitchen and poured the remainder down the drain. He rinsed out the bottle along with the glasses. After he had succeeded in planting the pair's fingerprints all over the glassware, he tossed them on the floor. Then he got Abe's straw hat and plaid coat and Speed Graphic from the bedroom.

After stripping Abe of everything but his striped shorts, he stretched the flabby body out on the divan. Then he flopped Yvonne next to the photographer and twined their unresisting arms around each other. When the sleepers were arranged to his liking, Thursday adjusted the camera and took two careful pictures.

He made a bundle of the hat and camera inside the coat and he was ready to go. His final act was to phone police headquarters. Adopting a southern accent, he identified himself to the desk sergeant as O. B. Hughes, one of the names he had read on the mail boxes below. He complained at length of the immoral goings-on in Apartment 2A and received assurance that an investigation would be made. [*Turn page*]

MONEY-SAVING SHAVES For Men with Tough Whiskers
Now Finest Single or Double Edge BLUE STEEL
Blades in handy DISPENSER 10 for 25¢

Blue STAR
SINGLE EDGE
DOUBLE EDGE

Carrying his bundle, he paused in the doorway to inspect his handiwork on the divan. For the first time since he had taken the client called Irene Whitney, he felt fairly pleased with himself. "Thursday's Revenge," he said aloud. "Or, The Biter Bit." He went out leaving the door ajar for the police.

CHAPTER XII

WEDNESDAY, August 19, 3:30 p. m.—— Thursday parked by the Army & Navy YMCA on the fringe of the night club district and changed into Abe's bright plaid coat. With the straw hat slanted over his eyes and the camera case under his arm, he slid out of his car and walked up Columbia. The Don Kerner Photo Studio had been converted from a small garage into a quick developer center for a string of photo girls. Thursday used the door in a plywood wall across what had been a driveway.

Inside, by a dusty gas pump, set a war surplus desk and a powdery aging blonde who was worried over a crossword puzzle. Two other younger women were reading movie magazines on a black leather lounge against the brick wall. Night club camera girls, killing time before going on duty.

The blonde didn't look up past the Speed Graphic. She stopped sucking her pencil to say, "Boss man's in the darkroom. He's waiting for you."

Thursday grunted and kept going across the concrete floor toward another plywood partition that divided the gloomy building. He veered away from the nearest door, which was open. It led to a dressing room with make-up tables and a row of steel lockers.

A backward glance told him nobody was paying him any attention. He decided his best bet was the heavy curtain in the second doorway. He pushed the curtain aside and rapped on the inset door.

A man's muffled voice said, "Yeah?"

"Abe," Thursday answered, trying to approximate the photographer's voice.

"Just a second," the man said. Thursday remembered to pull the curtain to behind him and waited, listening to movement within the darkroom. "Okay—come on in."

Thursday stepped into the absolute blackness and groped the door shut behind him. The other man switched on the red bulb over the sink. The dim shape of an enlarger seemed to leap at Thursday's head.

"Been sweating you out," Don Kerner said, wiping his hands on a paper towel. "She's phoned a couple times in the last half hour."

Thursday grunted as the safest form of communication and stayed by the door beyond the faint illumination. He had seen Kerner somewhere before. He was a big untidy man with a paunch and light hair and a heavy upper lip.

"Come on—give." He took the camera impatiently and pulled out the plate holder. "Hope you got something good." He turned out the light again.

Thursday stood still in the pitch dark while Kerner worked, praying the other man would drop a hint he could use. *"She's* phoned," Kerner had said. That was a beginning.

Kerner's high-pitched voice came out of the blackness. "May be another job for you right away. Tonight."

Thursday grunted, "Oh?" as a leader.

"Yeah. Some little snob. Going to use the beach party setup."

Thursday smiled for his own benefit, doubting whether that routine would ever come off after today's work.

Then Kerner said, "You stick around, Abe, till I get these printed and you can run them over to night and day for me yourself. She's got ants in her pants."

"Uh-huh," Thursday murmured. *She,* again. And *night and day.* He felt a glow

of fierce joy. Here were facts he could close his hands around.

KERNER complained, "Beats me what the grand rush is. Everybody's in too big a hurry these days, it seems to me." He turned on the red light again and with wooden tongs lifted the dripping negatives out of the developer and plunged them into the hypo tray. "Now we'll see what cooks."

Silently, Thursday inched away from the door, moving behind the photographer. Kerner bent over the hypo, studying the negatives and humming to himself. His humming stopped short and he bent even closer to the pan, not believing his eyes.

There was a moment in the darkroom when no one breathed. Then Kerner's bulk came to life. Grabbing up the tray of developer acid with both hands, he whirled and flung it at the door—where Thursday had been standing.

He never realized his mistake. Thursday smashed him in the mouth and cracked him a second time on the side of the jaw. As Kerner fell back against the big suspended enlarger, Thursday went with him, his fingers after the man's windpipe. They hit the floor together, along with the enlarger, and Thursday got up off the unconscious body.

He listened by the door for two minutes. Kerner had made no sound but some equipment had crashed around. Nobody came and Thursday wondered what he had to do to raise a crowd in this place.

He used the electric cord from the broken enlarger to bind Kerner's hands and feet and some paper toweling as a gag. Finally, he was satisfied that the photographer couldn't interfere with his plans for a little while, barring accidents.

Brown manila envelopes were piled on one of the shelves. Thursday took one and folded two others inside as filler. Before he switched off the light, he glanced at the pictures of Yvonne and Abe and was gratified to find that they were good and sharp.

On the way out, Thursday hesitated by the desk, holding the brown envelope so it partially masked his face. "Don says he doesn't want to be disturbed for anything."

The blonde shrugged over the word she was erasing from her puzzle. "Don't worry, guy. I keep the body out of darkrooms."

The two picture snatchers tittered appreciatively and Thursday went out. He filed Abe's hat and coat and the envelopes in the trash can beside his car.

CHAPTER XIII

WEDNESDAY, August 10, 4:00 p. m.—— The line in the YMCA's phone book read *Night & Day agcy Bnk Amer Bldg.* Thursday began to undergo the cold excitement of success. He dodged his sedan up Broadway to Sixth where the Bank of America Building towered over downtown. It was just a block from his own office.

He was the only passenger for the sixth floor where an elderly man was tapping his cane, impatient for the elevator. As the elderly man got on, he nodded to Thursday getting off. Thursday nodded back absently and looked over the various office doors.

Then he whirled around. The elderly man had known his face, hadn't placed it immediately and so had made the mistake of nodding as to an acquaintance. But it wasn't as an acquaintance he knew Thursday.

Through the closing doors of the elevator Thursday saw the dignified face of J. X. O'Connell, horror-struck at his error. Then the crack narrowed to nothing over the glimpse and the dial above the elevator doors spun swiftly from 6 to 1.

Thursday couldn't even find it in him-

self to swear. He had gotten the biggest break in the world but it had been timed a little too fast for him. Almost before he fully realized what he had missed, his quarry was lost in the quitting time crowd on Broadway.

So he smiled wryly and went looking for the right door, the door that O'Connell had undoubtedly just used. It turned out to be a double door and something special for the staid building. It was black with silver fittings, too deliberately impressive.

Thursday pushed through into a large waiting room that was also painted black and carpeted in a silver gray that exactly matched the nap of the low-slung furniture. No one was waiting. Thursday sauntered past two glass-walled interviewing booths to where the receptionist sat with typewriter and PBX board behind a glass barrier.

She was a pretty girl wearing an orchid whose edges were beginning to curl. She smiled nicely and asked to help him.

"I'm looking for a butler," Thursday explained. Behind her, in the office section, he could see a half-dozen more girls, all good looking, busy at deskwork.

"I see," the receptionist said. "I'm afraid that—we're not really an employment agency, you know, except in exceptional cases where our clients—"

"I understand that. But this is an exceptional case and your woman thought she could help me out."

"Oh, in that case." She plugged a connection on the PBX board. "Won't you please sit down for a moment while I see if she's busy? May I have your name, sir?"

"Max Thursday." He sank into the nearest bouncy chair. On either side of the room, by the glass barrier, was a single black door. The silver letters on one read MR. RUPERT, the other MISS DAY. Thursday was banking on Miss Day being Kerner's *she*.

He plucked an illustrated brochure from the neat rack of magazines. "What Is Night & Day?" Thursday opened to read the explanatory message. He smiled when the brochure told him that the firm sold personal services. "Let us act for you when the need arises . . ." The services included such varied jobs as meeting trains, buying Christmas gifts, serving legal papers, compiling statistics, catering for parties and standing in at proxy marriages. ". . . since 1944."

The receptionist said Miss Day would see him now.

He went into Miss Day's office, more silvery tones against black, and the woman rose from behind her black desk to come around and shake hands. "I'm Quincy Day," she said in a voice like a lullaby. "So pleasant of you to come to see me, Mr. Thursday. Please sit down. I'm sorry you had to wait but—" her soft strong hand slipped out of his to riffle across the cluttered desktop—"this paperwork! Business would be so simple if one didn't find it necessary to record one's brain on invoices and so many many memoranda."

SHE made him comfortable. Physically, anyway. Instinctively, he had already started a fight with himself. He knew what she was and how he intended to have her end up, by his own hand if possible. But, shouting against all the facts, the impulsiveness which was his worst enemy told him to like her. She radiated a warm human enchantment that got him.

He watched her make the return trip around her desk on extremely high heels, for a tall woman, which flattered the full contours of her legs. He said drily, "But the keyword of business is distrust. So you must write things down."

She said, "I'm afraid so," and took the pencil out of her black upswept hair and the harlequin glasses away from her round face. It wasn't the rakish frames of the glasses which had made Thursday see her as a streamlined friendly witch. Quincy Day had heavy slanting eyebrows and violet slanting eyes and there were no lobes to her tiny ears. She was sleekly plump.

Her smooth bare ivory neck flowed into a black crepe frock that was adorned only by her being inside it and an ornate Q on her left shoulder.

"However, there are benefits," she said. "If you discovered a way to make people trust one another and eliminated the keeping of records, think how many of us would be bereft of employment." Her smile was broad, cheerful and candid.

"Oh, people generally find a way to create a job where there isn't one." Thursday tried the same kind of smile. "Like Night & Day, for instance. San Diego struggled along for three hundred years without you. But now—"

"How true!" She poised her pencil. "Now let us hope we may prove indispensable to you too, Mr. Thursday."

"You are already."

"Splendid. Since the need already exists, then we don't have to scour our minds trying to create one. Instead, we face the comparatively simple task of finding the solution."

"Night & Day," said Thursday. "Who plays Night in the combination?"

She waggled her pencil impatiently but smiled. "Oh, more than once I've regretted choosing that particular name, although it fulfills the requirements: short, easy to remember and epitomizing service. No, there is no Night, Mr. Thursday, merely an attempt at cleverness. Now, what may we do for you?"

"I'm looking for a butler."

"So Marie told me. But as she told you, or should have told you—"

"Night & Day is not really an employment agency, except in exceptional cases where our clients something-or-other," he quoted.

"To the letter. Therefore—"

"But I have a rather special spot for a rather special butler. In fact, there's no place else I could go and be sure of getting satisfaction."

"Do go on, Mr. Thursday."

He linked his fingers behind his head and said dreamily, "I see a picture of what I want in my mind. A tall man with a poker up his back. Gray hair and a gray mustache that looks like a fine old toothbrush. A guy who might pass for a gentleman anywhere except that a real live gentleman would think he was a little overdressed with his white gloves and bamboo cane."

In the silence, Quincy's eyes darkened to purple. She murmured, "You're quite particular."

"I can afford to be. I know that such a guy exists and from his looks he has to be a butler or has been a butler. I've got great confidence in Night & Day. I'm sure you can put your finger on him if anybody can."

The phone buzzed. Quincy said, "Excuse me," and answered it. She listened to the other party impassively, her eyes still locked with Thursday's, pencil tapping softly. Finally she said, "I already know. No, I don't know how. Thank you for calling."

SHE hung up and began, "Mr. Thursday, I'm extremely sorry not to justify your confidence in Night & Day but I do fear—" The phone buzzed again. Again she put the receiver to her ear and listened serenely. But with this call she leaned back in her chair and took a deep breath and the pencil picked up tempo. "You're too late," she said into the mouthpiece, "much too late," and hung up again.

"An indispensable instrument, the telephone," Thursday said and let her study him.

Quincy stood up abruptly and slipped the pencil back into her hairdo. "I'm sorry not to be able to help you. If you'll leave your name with our receptionist and where you can be reached, I'll call you if something should arise. Meanwhile, several matters really need my personal attention—" she was circling the desk—"and so if you'll excuse me—"

Thursday stayed in the chair and said, "The first call was from O'Connell and the second from Kerner. Or vice versa."

Quincy stopped dead and flipped a

switch on the intercom. She told it, "Rupert—I need you." Her tongue between her teeth, she gave Thursday a lazy smile.

The office door opened and a short man padded in. He was a fat forty, innocuous and rabbit-faced. Wearing a bursting vest but no coat, he appeared to be the firm's accountant.

The woman commanded, "Rupert, throw this man out."

Rupert's mild eyes flickered and his pursy mouth drooped sadly. He looked at Thursday's long wiry body and he inquired, "What do you mean, Quincy dear?"

"Precisely what I said. This man is annoying me. Get rid of him."

"I see." Rupert paled and his cheek twitched. "Certainly. I advise you to run along, sir, and not make a scene. You heard what—"

Thursday got up easily and ambled slowly toward the little barrel of man. Rupert bit his lip and shifted his feet indecisively. "Now just a minute," he argued nervously. "There's no cause in our acting uncivilized about this."

"Rupert!"

Thursday closed his hand gently on Rupert's necktie and backed him out through the doorway. He said, "You'll have to pardon me," and shut the door in Rupert's face and shot the bolt. Then he turned to Quincy Day and said, "Please don't embarrass me like that again."

Her mouth, sensual a few minutes before, was now a narrow exasperated line. "I'll call the police. There's no reason I—"

"The number is Franklin 1101."

"You don't believe I will? Then you're daring me to—"

"You know your business better than I do." And Thursday sat down again.

Furiously, she snatched up the receiver and ordered the receptionist to get her the number. Thursday listened attentively to her wordy complaint of being molested by a strange man in her office and lit a cigarette.

She slammed the phone together and clasped her hands and asked, "Does that prove anything to you, Mr. Thursday?"

"No. Except that you chatter too much. Cigarette?"

"Indeed? Let me say that—" She clamped her mouth together again in the ugly line he didn't like and flounced behind her desk to sit down.

Thursday puffed out a little smoke screen between them. "Let me chatter a minute—about gypsies since you might be one. You know, the only real monarchy left in the world belongs to the Kalo Roms."

QUINCY stared stonily at the locked door behind him. Thursday picked a fleck of tobacco off his lower lip. "This case that comes to mind, the Queen regent had died up near San Berdoo. She didn't leave any kids, an unusual situation among gypsies which I won't bother to explain to you, Quincy. Consequently, a lot of families started wrangling about who'd take over."

Below on Broadway the sound of a siren died away to a moan. Thursday said, "The Budvano clan won the title but the Maravlasis—another big outfit—called cops, claiming the queen had been murdered for her job. A detective friend of mine was hired by said Budvanos to dig into the mess and turn up facts favorable to their cause and, as it finally came out, they were innocent, all right. But the Maravlasis weren't; they were running heroin on the side. So they don't do much gypsying any more. I guess it doesn't pay to call cops if you got anything to hide."

An open hand banged on the door. Thursday put out his cigarette and got up to unbolt it.

Rupert peered over the policeman's shoulder.

Thursday laughed and sat down again. "Are you assigned to me special, Hoover?"

Rupert stayed in the doorway. Hoover stalked in, eyeing Thursday suspiciously, but taking his hand off his persuader.

"There's supposed to be a Miss Day here. I got a call on the radio—"

Quincy swept around him, beaming. "I'm Quincy Day, officer. While I'm thoroughly impressed by your alacrity, I'm very much afraid you've had all your trouble for nothing, although I do appreciate your promptness ever so so much."

"Yeah?" Hoover looked Thursday over doubtfully. "I still have to know what's been going on."

"A slight misunderstanding," Quincy soothed. "But all taken care of now. Mr. Rupert here, my associate, apparently had a few too many and tried to pick a fight with Mr. Thursday. I became frightened and I—well—" she was helplessly feminine and Thursday wanted to applaud—"I suppose I called for the police when I shouldn't."

Hoover grunted. "This on the level, Thursday?"

"You heard the lady."

Rupert's mouth hung open. Quincy regarded him sorrowfully. "I'm certain Rupert is ready to apologize for his part in this and Mr. Thursday has very graciously decided not to press charges. So you see, officer—it was really foolish of me to bother you. I do hope you'll forgive me."

Hoover scanned them all once again. Then he shrugged, tight-lipped. He made a brief entry in his report book and said to Thursday, "I go off duty at six. Can you get through the night without me?" And as he passed by Rupert, "Next time you pick a fight stay in your class, fellow."

Quincy followed him into the waiting room, apologizing profusely. When she came back, she jerked her sleek head at Rupert. "Get out."

"I only did—"

"I know."

Quincy pushed him out of the way and closed the door and came over to lean against the desk front by Thursday. Her slant eyes darkened again as she glowered down at him over her bosom. She looked now as a witch should look. Her words came out in a low hiss. "What is it you want?"

He had never seen so much hate in a face so tranquil. He smiled up at her ruefully. "Funny, I like you personally. I don't know how this may come out, whether I salt you down in prison or the gas chamber. It won't make any difference about that, but I like you."

"No, it won't make one bit of difference. However, that's not what I asked. *What is it you want?*"

Thursday got up gravely. He put a little-kid kiss on the tip of his forefinger and planted it lightly on her nose. Quincy didn't flinch and her baleful eyes didn't let go of his. He murmured, "A butler," and left her.

CHAPTER XIV

WEDNESDAY, August 10, 5:00 p. m.—— Thursday put in a brief appearance at his own office to see what sort of message Irene Whitney had left. She hadn't left any; there was no indication that she had tried to get in touch with him. He couldn't figure that out. Monday he had watched the anxiety bubble under her veneer of self-control. Yet two days had passed since she had shown any interest in her ten IOUs.

He suddenly dialed a number and said, "This is Max. Stick around. I'm coming over." He wangled his car through the homing press of traffic to the Spreckels Building.

John D. Meier was a short powerful man in his mid-thirties with black bushy eyebrows and a fierce doubting scowl. He was perched on the edge of his secretary's desk drumming his heels when Thursday walked in. "Can you read?" was his abrupt greeting.

Thursday grinned and flopped on the waiting bench. "Sure. The sign says Insurance Claims Investigations. You afraid of work?"

"The sign also says office hours 9 to 5. Saturdays 9 to 1. What kind of favor you after this time, Thursday?"

"You're uncanny, John. Look, you've got access to some information I might need. I mean the national insurance cross files. It'll be a big help if you pull a check for me. I'm onto a female who seems hipped on the photography angle of easy money and I think you might have something on her if you'll be so wonderfully kind as to look."

"Well, don't break down and cry. What's her name?"

"I'll bet it isn't hers so let's not fog the issue. She's five eight, under thirty by not very much with kind of oriental eyes, violet colored. That's the unchangeable stuff. She's also a brunette, hundred and forty pounds but stacked just dandy."

Meier chuckled. "Never mind her name. What's her phone number?"

"You don't like gabby women. How about the check?"

"I can try. But photography. For a modus operandi that sounds more like shakedown than insurance fraud."

"What makes you say so?"

"I've got it on the brain. Say, how about the cops? Can't you work through your buddy Clapp?"

"Not at this point, John. You see, we're good enough friends to protect each other. He wouldn't slip me anything that might involve his integrity and I don't make him keep any of my secrets."

"How sweet." Meier jumped down off the desk, made a note on a scratch pad and stuffed it in his pocket. "Uninvolved as I may be, I got to admit you couldn't have caught me at a worse time. Come on, let's get this show on the road."

They rode down in the elevator together. "Busy?" Thursday asked.

"This Showalter smashup has got me talking to myself."

"Perry Showalter? I read about it."

"What do you know! It's only been page one since a week ago when he skidded his car off Torrey Pines grade. He was loaded with insurance. Only natural for a guy in his position."

They got off the elevator. "He skidded the car, huh? Not, the car skidded. You know what that sounds like."

"It sounds like what I'm talking about, Thursday. Suicide. The papers don't know. But I've established he was despondent and I'm going to establish the rest of it—the reason."

"You going to break his policies on the suicide clause?"

MEIER shook his head. "No. They're beyond the limitations." Meier quoted sing-song, "If the insured, whether sane or insane, shall die by his or her own hand or act within one year from the date hereof, this policy will be void and shall have no value—but in such event the company will return the premium paid, end of sentence. No, I'm out to break the double indemnity, that's all. Suicide is no accident."

"Don't you ever get tired of robbing widows, John?"

"I do. But suicide is still no accident. Us ghouls have regulations. And Showalter was despondent for a good and sufficient reason according to Benedict and me."

"Benedict? Is he in it?"

"Figure this one out. Showalter owned one of the biggest, most profitable hardware stores in San Diego. Social leader. Prominent yachtsman. Worth piles—but he's got practically no money left that we can find."

"Well, well," Thursday murmured. "That's why you've got blackmail on the brain."

"Yup. Family's lucky he accumulated all that insurance. Otherwise, they'd be next to broke since the store turned out to be in hock. That's what we figure Showalter figured—killed himself before he had to cash in the insurance policies, too." Meier shrugged and grinned. "I should feel sorry for a guy like that. Well, take care of yourself, Thursday. Call me or I'll call you."

"Right."

THURSDAY watched Meier's stocky figure march off to his automobile. After a moment, he turned and went slowly to find his own. He drove home to his duplex, showered, shaved and picked up Merle Osborn at her apartment a little before seven. Off duty, she affected less masculinity. She softened her voice and wore a dress that draped beguilingly and let her hair down in a dusty-brown cloud around her face. "The Disguise" was their standing joke.

They ate dinner in a candlelit booth at the Cotton Patch. When they had rinsed their fingers clean of the barbecued spare ribs, Merle challenged him with her round eyes.

"Talk up, kiddo."

"About what?"

"About anything of current interest. You're getting to be just like a doctor. You're so used to playing the smug act for everybody—simply crawling with inside information—that you can't relax. I'm no client, you know."

He chuckled. "What I got to be smug about, I don't know. But I must be, since Clapp said so yesterday and you said so right now."

"Oh, forget it." She took his hand across the table. "I'm just picky. I feel left out."

"Left out of what?"

"Out of some trouble you're in. I know that bemused look of yours."

"I'm bemused, all right. Got any J. X. O'Connell?"

"Not a word. My files don't know the name."

"Got any Quincy Day?"

Merle didn't say anything right away. Then she forced a laugh. "Pardon my girlish jealousy. I did a feature on her when she opened—an extra assignment, nothing in the crime line." She paused, gazing dolefully at him between the candles. "Say, you've got a nice-looking client there, haven't you?"

"Don't let it worry you, honey."

"Me? I don't worry about women. I worry about the gay way you do business. I worry about small artillery."

"I don't carry any; I won't meet any. That's my axiom since—you know when." He squeezed her fingers. "Actually, I'm not shutting you out of a thing. I got nothing but hunches on a job that doubles its size every time I turn around. Don't breathe it to a soul, but the great Thursday doesn't know where he is at."

"Okay, okay." She grinned and made a kiss at him. "But keep that thick head covered, huh, boy? The D.A. is waiting behind the door with an axe and I'm not kidding."

"Osborn—if I worried about all the people who hated my guts I'd never have won the war. If you think Benedict's a fan, you should have seen my C.O. Why, the day I took Saipan—"

She let him ramble through the entire story before she said, "Yes, you told me."

Later, when they walked through the balmy night to his Oldsmobile, he said, "Here's a hunch."

She bumped closer to him. "What I think it is?"

"No. This involves a war of attrition and a tip for you. Don't let on that it's a tip. But suppose you nose deeper into the Showalter story, the financial side, I mean. I'd like to see that get some publicity."

"Okay, but I don't feel very newsy right now." Merle added tentatively, "I claim there's beer in a certain loose lady's refrigerator plus soda for the loose lady's scotch. Want to check that lead, copper?"

He patted her. "Not tonight, Osborn. I'm going to make a big day tomorrow and that calls for some eight hours of sacktime."

"Okay. I guess I'll have to destroy the evidence myself. If you find you can't sleep—"

"Not tonight. Don't be lonesome," he counseled.

"Me?" She fluffed up her back hair elaborately. "What's one dumb detective more or less? Where I come from, we use them for bait."

CHAPTER XV

THURSDAY, August 11, 9:00 a. m.——The *Sentinel* on his doorstep the next morning had nothing to say about Yvonne Odler or the photographer Abe. Nor did the *Union* which Thursday bought in the lobby of the Moulton Building. He wasn't surprised, knowing the power of the Odler name.

Fred, counting his change across the cigar stand counter, had the only news. He muttered, "Lady went up about eight-thirty."

"What kind of lady?"

"The blonde. The high-hat one you said to keep an eye out for."

Thursday went up and opened his office. He sat behind his desk and pretended to be amazed when Irene Whitney came in at three minutes after nine. She took the client chair without a word, nodding her hello and waiting coolly for him to speak.

He said, "Nice day, isn't it, Miss Whitney?"

She puckered her mouth quizzically and considered and said in her clipped way, "Yes, I believe it will be." She wore a linen suit of canary yellow with gloves, belt and shoes of white. She was not at all nervous.

"It was a nice day Tuesday. Might I ask why you couldn't give me a ring?"

"I stopped by here about half past three Tuesday afternoon. Your office was locked and I thought better of leaving a message."

"I figured all that hocus pocus Monday in Loma Portal was to avoid connecting yourself with this office. You change your mind?"

"Somewhat. Monday, I handled matters so poorly and put myself in such a ridiculous light that, well—"

"At least, we're coming along. Now why the lack of interest yesterday?"

"Really, Mr. Thursday!" Her slow-spreading smile softened her aristocratic face. "Wasn't Wednesday a dangerous day for anyone to show interest in you? Please, may I have them now?"

Thursday frowned. "Have what?"

Her smile stiffened, a bit haughtily. "Don't play, please. I *am* taking a risk coming here at all, more of a risk than you'll ever know. Please give me my IOUs."

"I don't have them." The assurance on her face didn't fade during the moment of stillness, so Thursday thought she hadn't heard and said it again.

"But in the papers—the murder! Papago was killed, wasn't he? Naturally, I assumed—"

"—that I murdered him to recover your IOUs and earn your lousy fee." Thursday laughed, a quick bitter sound. "Naturally, you'd assume that. Tell me, will you find it necessary to bathe immediately upon leaving this office?"

She said, as a matter of form, "I apologize. I didn't mean quite that."

"Not quite. You didn't mean for me to get insulted at the idea of taking your money for killing a man. I apologize if I seem touchy, Miss Whitney. But you've got the same crummy ideas about my character as Papago's mistress and she's a little beneath your class. Let's get it straight. I didn't kill George Papago for your gambling debts or any other reason."

"Then who—" she began faintly.

Thursday said, "Shortly before you hired me, a man using the name of J. X. O'Connell called on Papago. He represented himself as your lawyer, paid for the IOUs and made off with them. When I saw Papago all I succeeded in doing was to needle his ingrown cupidity. He smelled easy money so he went out to find O'Connell himself. He found him and O'Connell beat his head in. That's a progress report, Miss Whitney."

Now the fright blurred her clean-cut features. The padded shoulders of her yellow suit went up and down rapidly with her breathing. "How—that's ghastly!"

"Yes, it's ghastly and it's also confidential. Not that you want to have anything to do with the police."

"No, of course not—never! But this means she really does have my IOUs."

"Then you've heard from the woman who called you about the IOUs again."

"Last evening. She telephoned during dinner and told me I had only until next week. I wasn't too much upset because I was certain that you already had them," she remembered to finish.

"Next week. To scrape your payment together?"

"In a way," Irene said guardedly.

THURSDAY shook his head exasperatedly. "Who you the most afraid of—her or me? You don't seem very accustomed to lying, at least you do a punk job of it, so why don't you give me a decent chance to help you? What's this hold she has over you?"

Her light blue eyes pleaded with dignity. "I daren't tell you that," she whispered. "Mr. Thursday, ask me anything else."

"Okay. Is this mystery woman Yvonne Odler?"

Her mouth fell slightly apart. "Good heavens, no! What do you know about Yvonne Odler?"

"What do you know about her?"

"I didn't say that I knew anything about her. You introduced her name into the conversation."

Thursday banged his palms wearily on the edge of the desk and got up. He went over to the window and stood rubbing the back of his neck while he squinted at the hot clean morning sky.

"Look, Miss Whitney. Your little recovery case has turned into a murder case which I don't belong in. I'm getting under the D.A.'s feet, where I also don't belong, because I'm liable to lose my temper at that righteous pillar, which act would benefit him only. I'm up against a small army of shakedown artists. Isn't that enough trouble without my being up against my client, too?"

She didn't answer and he didn't look around at her. He said, droning, "Either you level with me or we'll call it quits."

"You mean you'd withdraw and leave me helpless?"

"I'm doing just that."

"No." He heard her chair rasp the floor as she rose. Her voice came closer, the chopped tones having difficulty conveying the emotion she wanted to convey. "Mr. Thursday—Max—I'm not accustomed to begging, either, but I'm begging with you now. Please don't—please—"

He turned around and she was standing in front of him, kneading her purse. He looked down at the perfect part in her blond hair. She wore her hair skinned back functionally, like Merle Osborn but neater. He asked, "Why not?"

"Because I am helpless. I'm so alone in this and I need you desperately."

"Not enough to trust me with facts. For example—Tuesday afternoon you drove by the alligator farm where Papago's body was found. Nobody knew about Papago at the time except me and the cops. But you slowed down and stared and stared. How did you know?"

Irene raised her eyes. They were steady if the smile she was trying to wear on her pink mouth flickered. She moistened her lips and murmured, "Max, can't you just trust me? Not my actions, just me?"

"If I trusted like that, I'd be deader than Papago and he's three days dead. You've got to do more than cross your heart."

"What can I say?"

"The truth."

HER frightened face was lifted. She stepped her small straight body nearer so that it touched his at hips and chest. The passionate curl to her mouth was a horrible joke and so was her voice, crooning, "Max—don't I mean anything to you? Won't you—mayn't I offer you anything to help me?"

"I have your retainer."

"But I meant"—the cords of her

throat tautened, choking her—"I didn't mean—"

She burst away from him and turned her back and the padded yellow shoulders shuddered with her sobbing. "I can't do it!" she moaned. "I can't do it!"

Thursday said softly, "Of course, you can't. There's a hundred things you aren't accustomed to and abridgment of self-respect seems to top the list. You're clumsier at that than at lying. I'm glad to have it proved because I thought from the beginning that you were quite a nice lady. Now blow your nose and stop calling yourself names and—"

The telephone shrilled. He swung it up. "Thursday speaking."

Silence. Then the other party began babbling and Thursday thought it was a woman. Only when the scared cataract of words began to make some sense did he realize it was Don Kerner's high-pitched voice. The photographer ran out of breath with, "Thursday, I've got to see you!"

"Calm down. You've got my address."

"I can't come there. It's out of the question. I can't go anywhere. I've got to see you, Thursday, right away!"

"Why?"

Kerner's panting labored through the receiver. He began saying over and over, "They're after me! They're going to kill me!"

"Shut up!" Thursday snapped. "Where you phoning from? Is your car there?"

"Rexall place, Twelfth and Market. My car's not here. It's still—"

"Anyone tailing you?"

"No, I don't think so. But I know they're—"

"Okay, listen. Grab a bus and get down to the Coronado ferry. Ride back and forth on the top deck of a ferry boat until I get there. Understand?"

"Yeah," Kerner said. "Yeah, I can do that. But be—"

Thursday broke the connection and looked at Irene Whitney. She had repaired her face and she lingered by the client chair as if it gave her strength. But her chin was up with its former hauteur. "I won't annoy you by apologizing at length, but I am completely sorry. You've been perfectly fine and I've behaved very badly. I understand about your position, your business, and I'll send you payment in full. Please don't worry any more about my affairs, I don't intend that. Perhaps my problem isn't as difficult as I've—"

"Call me tomorrow," he said. "I wasn't teasing out your speech just to hear it all—I've been reconsidering. But please call."

She said firmly, "Are you certain it's right to continue? I mean, what I'm trying not to do is jeopardize your business sense out of regard for my being a woman."

"What business sense?" he grinned. "Granted I like you, Miss Whitney, even when you wipe your feet on me. But that's the least of my whims."

"Then what—"

He plucked his hat off the costumer. "There's nasty people picking on you and they've insulted me. I guess I'm spoiling for a fight."

CHAPTER XVI

THURSDAY, August 11, 10:00 a. m.——He circled the top deck of the ferry twice after the boarding whistle had hooted. The taste of the harbor breeze was good in Thursday's throat but there was no Don Kerner. He made a strolling perusal of the automobile deck with no better results. So he returned up top and simply had a ride, leaning on the rail and watching the seagulls attack the glaring water for garbage. He had left his Oldsmobile in the police headquarters parking lot which was a block from the San Diego ferry slip.

The bulky craft disgorged at Coronado, reloaded, hooted some more and made the return trip. Thursday sat on

a bench and watched another batch of city passengers file aboard. He looked for the paunchy blond smooth-shaven man he remembered from a picture long ago. He nearly missed his man. Don Kerner was a redhead; he wore a ragged red mustache. Thursday chuckled and privately blessed darkroom lights everywhere. It had been the red developer bulb yesterday which had let him see through Kerner's altered face. The rosy light had made his hair as colorless as in the old days; the light had faded the new mustache back into the upper lip. "Luck," he reminded himself gently. "Luck, not brains."

Kerner's baggy figure marched on by him and collapsed on a bench a few yards away. Thursday inspected the people who boarded behind the photographer but they seemed harmless enough. When the ramp gate closed he moved over beside Kerner and said, "Start talking. Keep it soft."

Kerner's hands wouldn't stay still. When they weren't scratching the red mustache, they were wiping themselves on his creaseless trousers. He hadn't shaved yet today and he looked like a D.T. vag case. It was coward's fright. He talked.

"Who's they?" Thursday cut in when the jerky sentences began to repeat.

"Night & Day. You know—you were there. That's the reason. They think it's my fault you got that far. That I should have stopped you. How? How could I when—"

"They tell you this?"

"No, no," moaned Kerner. "They didn't tell me anything. Not a thing."

"What makes you so worried, then?"

"I called them on the phone a dozen times. Yesterday. This morning. They won't talk to me. I went there myself an hour ago. Nobody'd see me. The girl kept lying, kept saying they were out. She didn't know when they'd be in but it was a lie. I could hear that Quincy's voice through the door. She was being sweet to some customer while everybody lied to me, Thursday."

Kerner tried to hold his hands together in his lap. "She's poison. I'm marked, Thursday. I know it. They're going to get rid of me. You know there's only one safe way to get rid of me. They'll do it!"

"Maybe and maybe not. Where do I fit in?"

"You got to help me. See, you help me and I'll help you. I don't want to start running. I'm getting old." Kerner grabbed his arm and then released it swiftly, not wanting to hazard any chances by presumption. "You got to help me because I only know one trade. They'd track me through that. I got no place to go."

"No, they'd find you, all right," Thursday said. "I can help. The question is, do I want to?"

"You got to want to! What am I supposed to do? Wait around Dago here and take it?"

"What do you know that I'd like to know?"

"Anything—anything. Just ask me anything," Kerner begged.

"Keep your voice down. Start with you."

'Me?" Kerner stared vaguely out at an aircraft carrier in midchannel. "I'm nobody, just Don Kerner. I've had that photography setup on Columbia for a couple years now. Before that I did some movie work up north and got laid off. I never knew what she was letting me in for until it was too late. You got to believe that, so help me!"

Thursday said flatly, "You're a liar, so help me. Before you became Don Kerner, you were Don Cornish, alias Don Cornwall, alias Sam Pierce, alias I don't know what all. You served out five years at San Quentin for extortion involving pictures when you double-crossed the tart who helped you work the tourist camps around Sacramento. Your movie experience consists of seeing one a week along with the rest of your cell block."

"No, that's wrong—"

"Wrong, thinking hair dye and a

mustache and a bigger belly would cover up a cheap roper like you. Once you're mugged, you're mugged for good." Thursday stood up scornfully. "See, I found out whether you'd throw me a curve or not. I'm not going to fall in pulling you out."

THE ferry was banging into the Coronado slip again. Kerner turned his sagging face up and clutched at Thursday's coat. "All right, all right," he implored brokenly. "It's a lie, I admit that. You know me. But the rest of it's true. You got to listen to me, Thursday."

"To another bedtime story?" But Thursday sat down again and had a cigarette, waiting for Kerner to come out of it. The other man had an attack of trembling and wiped his hand across his damp face.

"No more bedtime stories. Straight goods," Kerner said with an effort. "You must have a terrific memory. I got sprung in '40. Drifted around, going straight, finally set up here in Dago. For a while, everything fine. Then this Night & Day came around with a proposition—she knew about me, too. It was big money and there isn't much of that on the level, so I started handling their business."

"Extortion again."

"Sure, big time. My nightclub girls worked right in with it, though they never knew. They'd get a picture of Joe Blow out with some other guy's wife. Night & Day would collect. They got a tie-in with a couple national lonelyhearts sucker lists. Bellboys, too, and some call girls and hackdrivers and a bartender or two—all fingering for them." Kerner shivered and whispered for himself, "It's big."

"Who's the boss?"

Kerner looked surprised. "Her. Quincy Day. I told you."

Thursday laughed. "I'm just trying to figure what you might have for sale. I could have gotten this far with a ouija board, Kerner."

"I'm getting to it. I'm getting to it."

Kerner took a deep breath and huddled closer to Thursday and mumbled, "Copies of everything Night & Day is doing business with. Can you use that stuff?"

Thursday began to smile off at space. "You improve with age."

"It works this way. First, Night & Day lets the sucker know they got something on him. Then they send him a photo copy to prove it. He pays so much every month to keep it under cover—regular invoices and everything. When I joined up, I saw it might be smart to pull my own copy of all the stuff. I got it all stashed away in a locker downtown under another name."

"Kerner, you ought to be analyzed. You got perfect rat psychology."

"Is the stuff worth anything to you?"

"How'd you manage to stay alive this long? All this time you've been working for shakedown people and looking forward to shaking them down. Here's the time come, and you're scared spitless."

"But is it worth anything to you?" Kerner whined, tugging at Thursday's arm.

Thursday jerked away from him. Then he sighed. He said, "Lucky I got an end in view or I'd never come down to your level. You bring your stuff back here. I'll do what I can to save your life, though I think it's a waste of time."

WHEN the ferry berthed on the San Diego side, Don Kerner slunk ashore and caught the bus headed uptown. Thursday roamed around the top deck, smoking and wondering if he would ever see Kerner again. But two crossings later the man was back, a bulging manila envelope under his coat.

The noon rush had started now and more passengers were flocking aboard. They found a secluded spot forward and Kerner fidgeted while Thursday examined the photo copies one by one. Occasionally the detective raised his eyebrows or whistled softly, but otherwise he was deathly silent.

"Well?" Kerner demanded finally. "Is that good or isn't it?" There was a sniggering pride in his voice.

Thursday spit over the side and eyed him and the photographer began to deflate. Thursday said, "Don't get cocky or I'll toss you to the seagulls. Where are the originals for this stuff?"

"I don't know. Maybe they're in her office. That's where I send them back to and that's where the invoice files are. Where Night & Day keeps the hot stuff, I don't know."

"Okay. You've done your part so I'll do mine. Come on. We'll get off in Coronado."

He ignored Kerner's attempts to whisper nervous questions as they debarked. With the other man at his heels, Thursday strode down the ramp into the terminal and the nearest telephone booth. He dialed the Coronado police station.

"My name is Max Thursday." The desk sergeant didn't know him so he recited his private license number. "I'm down at your ferry terminal. I want to prefer assault charges against a bum who just got rough. I'll hold him here for a prowl car."

Kerner tried to get away.

Thursday caught him by the magazine stand and dragged him toward the shadow of a pillar, away from the curious passengers boarding. Kerner whimpered, "Let me go! You're trying to cross me. I heard you!" He twisted and threw a clumsy punch into Thursday's mouth.

Thursday snarled, "Shut up!" and bent Kerner's arm up behind. "I'll do this thing my way. Jail's the place you'll be safest. Let them book you under a phony name, James Donald, and keep your mouth shut. In a couple days, or as soon as it's safe, I'll drop the charges and that'll be that. Don't try anything with the cops or they'll look up the record behind your prints and you'll make the papers. Now—are you going to behave?"

Kerner had made his last effort. He nodded dumbly and when the prowl car arrived, shambled toward it almost drunkenly. Thursday knew the driver and promised to file charges later in the afternoon. The story held up under the casual police questions. Thursday was known and a trickle of blood stained his chin where Kerner had hit him. Kerner, unshaven and pallid and mussed, looked like just another vagrant.

When the prowl car roared off, Thursday found a lonely bench in the terminal and sorted through the blackmail material again. He tore off the flap of the envelope and made himself a list of names. The photo copies ranged from hotel registries and personal letters to candid pictures and one prison record.

But there were no duplicates of ten IOUs from The Natchez bearing the signature of Irene Whitney. Thursday frowned and puzzled and gave up. For some reason, the blond woman's gambling notes weren't being handled through the usual Night & Day channels.

He rented a safe deposit box in the Coronado branch of the Bank of America under the name of James Donald and left his morning's haul hidden there. He spent another half hour poring through the bank's phone directory, matching numbers with the list of names on the envelope flap. Then he had lunch at a sandwich shop.

The cashier said, "You look like your mother-in-law just died, mister."

"Honey, I have struck uranium in my backyard. Give me a couple dollars worth of nickels. I want to tell all my friends."

Thursday spent his afternoon, with short breaks for air, closeted in a phone booth. Painstakingly, while sweat dripped onto his brown paper list, he traced every name. To each, his proposition was the same: "I know you are being blackmailed. My office is in a position to recover all material being used against you. Would you care to retain me as your representative at one hundred dollars flat fee? On a contingency basis, of course."

The reaction ran the gamut, ranging from frightened denial of understanding what he was talking about to hopeful enthusiasm. When it was over he emerged from the booth for the last time, hoarse from talking and aching from confinement, Thursday counted the checkmarks on his list. He had twenty-three new clients.

Twilight was insinuating darkness across the harbor when he rode back and the North Island beacon was flashing brighter and brighter. He leaned against the forward rail gazing dreamily where the starry lights of San Diego approached. He figured. Twenty-three times a hundred was twenty-three hundred dollars—for doing what he would have to do anyway for Irene Whitney. It was a happy sum.

But that wasn't why he suddenly laughed aloud. A detail had occurred to him in his dream, a detail still standing between him and twenty-three extra fees. He had to find the original blackmail material.

CHAPTER XVII

THURSDAY, August 11, 9:00 p. m.—— "Okay, Maxie, I'll come down to twenty which is plenty big-hearted." Joaquin Vespasian beamed smugly and rocked his little body on the edge of the flowered divan. "Just because I'd rather see you get this than the cops."

Thursday smiled faintly and sighed and put "Heart of Darkness" away in the bookcase. He thought about how he met such interesting people. He stood in the center of the living room of his duplex and eyed this evening's example, Vespasian, nagging him like a gaudy vulgar elf. Vespasian's tan-haired tan-skinned head suddenly put Thursday in mind of a small basketball and he idly visioned batting it off its plaid body.

Vespasian said, "Well? Twenty because I like you, Maxie. We can get along." He winked.

Thursday winked back, pokerfaced. "Now you've come hinting around, chum, you might as well know you're not leaving without a chat. But I never pay in advance."

"You muscle boys think you can shove anybody around." Vespasian popped some gum in his mouth, sneering discreetly.

"That's right." Thursday sat on the arm of the easy chair by the door, waiting.

"Okay, if that's the way you deal. I'll trust you to pay up because this is going to bowl you over. Monday you were hunting a character by name of J. X. O'Connell." Vespasian lidded his owl eyes. "Maxie, I got him."

"That's very interesting. Monday, I mentioned O'Connell's name and you fell over yourself volunteering to help me find him. You didn't bother to ask what he looked like. But you found him anyway. I think I'll call Clapp just to hear him laugh."

"Now don't get any cockeyed ideas. This is how it was."

Vespasian chewed his gum and folded his hands around a bony knee. Thursday noticed his cufflinks were shined dazzlingly but the cuffs were limp and soiled. Typical.

"Monday I was just keeping the old mind open. If you had trusted me with O'Connell's looks, we might have saved some valuable time. You know what I hooked together, Maxie? The papers said a certain well-dressed gent was seen with Papago Monday night. Keeping the old mind open did the rest."

"Okay. Then you know O'Connell."

"Not as O'Connell, you might know. The name he gave me was Fathom. Colonel Ellis Fathom."

Thursday snorted.

"Oh, that Colonel angle's just flash. It just doesn't matter. What's a name? The world the way it is, we can't be choosy about who we meet."

"No, we certainly can't."

"Colonel Fathom," said Vespasian, "lives just three blocks from here, Maxie. He came in at eight forty-five and I ran right down here. Now let's talk pay-off in the same language. I put my half straight."

Thursday got up and ambled over to Vespasian. He patted his hands over the plaid suit. No gun. He went back and relaxed in the big chair. "Vespasian, let's talk the same language, period. Out of this fair city—four hundred thousand population—you recognized this Fathom-O'Connell by a one-line description in the papers which said, as I remember, only that he was tall and gray haired and well dressed. And after recognizing him from last night's papers, you waited one whole day before coming to see me about it. Keep spinning."

Vespasian only smirked. "You're hashing up my story. Okay, so let me put this tag on it. This Colonel Fathom joe came to see me in connection with George Papago, about two weeks ago. Somebody—now, I don't know who—had told Fathom that Nell Kopke was a client of mine. He wanted me to milk her for some kind of information. I turned him down."

"Why? Wasn't his money good?"

"Not good enough. In Nell I had a good steady income, sucker. I wasn't going to kick that out the window for a one-shot with this Fathom."

"Uh-huh. So why the hiatus between you knowing who I was after and letting me know?"

"Maxie, you keep forgetting I got a mouth to feed. I figure my dope is worth more to you if I can lay the old finger on Fathom. So it took me twenty-four hours which I call pretty good." Vespasian split his wise face with a grin. "See, I got notions of connecting with your setup in a quiet way. Cops—mostly what I get out of them is certain freedom of operation. A smart fellow like you might mean something more usable to a smart fellow like me. Usable meaning money."

"Before you paint your name on my door," Thursday said drily, "let's empty the old pockets concerning Fathom."

"All-around boy, if the gossip's right. He's been a sideshow barker, a pitchman, fronted for some con jobs. Last local job was some valet deal—ended about a year ago. Of course he's had stuff going on the side I didn't hear about."

"Valet," said Thursday thoughtfully. He wandered into the bedroom and got his coat and hat. "Let's go round him up, Vespasian. You've sold me."

The little man beamed and winked. "I told you."

THEY took Vespasian's middle-aged Ford sedan, chugging up the hill toward Balboa Park by way of Laurel Street. It was a neighborhood where weathered frame mansions brooded over squat new stucco houses. Some of the tall old houses still were sprucely kept· most of them sported ROOMS—KITCHEN PRIVILEGES signs and their yards looked tired. Vespasian wheeled up the cracked driveway of one of these and stopped under the ivied porte-cochère. A cold light beamed down on the two men as they slid silently out of the car. Thursday brushed along the head-high evergreen hedge overgrowing that side of the driveway and rounded the sedan to join Vespasian on the porch.

The little man raised his eyebrows, thumbing up at the only lighted window on the second floor. "Check'll do if you don't have cash."

They pushed through the heavy front door and stood in a dim hallway of closed doors and an ornate staircase. A radio audience applauded in some unseen parlor. The smell of years and stale cooking hung in the air. But none of the boarders made an appearance as Vespasian lightly led the way up the carpeted steps.

He stopped without knocking before the first door to the left on the head of the stairs. He grinned gaily and rubbed his hands.

Thursday clamped a hand on Vespa-

sian's shoulder and held him in front of him as a shield. Then he knocked gently. Carpet slippers plopped across wooden flooring toward the door. It opened broadly, unsuspectingly, and for the second time Thursday gazed into the shocked eyes of Colonel Ellis Fathom, alias J. X. O'Connell.

Thursday propelled his shield into the room first and the pseudo Colonel backed away, mouthing incoherence. Thursday shot the bolt and the three were alone in the bedroom.

Fathom scrambled for his dignity and managed a weakly hearty laugh. Steam wisped from the tiny bathroom where he had just bathed and shaved. His pompous face was still pink from the razor. His dressing had gotten no farther than a white linen shirt and blue silk shorts. He was bravado on skinny legs. "So you've caught up with me, eh?"

Thursday said nothing. Vespasian flitted from between the two tall men and loitered by the scarred bureau. Fathom laughed again, more successfully. "Very clever of you, I concede that. It must have been no small task to ferret me out. My compliments."

Thursday nodded and began to drift silently around the room. He fingered through the contents of Fathom's trousers pockets, piled neatly on the bureau top. The wallet was empty and he stared thoughtfully at Vespasian who relinquished the seventeen dollars in bills he had palmed.

"However, perhaps it's bad form for the hare to compliment the hounds, even such extremely persistent hounds," Fathom said. The elderly man was posturing desperately and there was a keen edge of terror to his cultured voice. Thursday rummaged through the bureau drawers, glancing now and then at Fathom in the mirror but saying nothing.

"Of course, you've not a particle of proof. Not one particle. You may suspect what you please but it will take more than these high-handed tactics to stand up in our courts of law. . . ."

From beneath the undershirts in the bottom drawer, Thursday pulled a box of stationery. Beneath the monogrammed paper was a thin packet of newspaper clippings, held together with a rubber band. Fathom coughed, choked and went on urgently, "I admit that I should have come forward when I read of the tragedy but that's a crime of omission. I didn't care for the notoriety, that's all."

When he had finished rifling through the clippings, Thursday tossed them on the bureau. He looked under the mattress of the unmade bed and under the chair cushion. He opened the closet and touched through the pocekts of all the suits quickly while Fathom expostulated with growing frenzy behind him. They were beautifully woven, beautifully cut garments which Thursday would have liked to own. The oddity of envy in this situation flicked him piquantly.

He turned away from the closet with a single find. Fathom saw it and his voice died away. It was a lightweight inexpensive bamboo cane, glistening new.

Flexing the bamboo in both fists, Thursday said softly, "Now tell me about killing George Papago."

Fathom blurted, "I'm an innocent man. The last I saw of Papago was on the night he was killed, yes, but I left him alive. I left him alive and alone with Irene Whitney."

CHAPTER XVIII

THURSDAY, August 11, 9:45 p.m.——The sterling ring of his alibi seemed to give Colonel Fathom courage. He drew erect and smiled smoothly, fingering his crisp mustache. "So you see, Thursday, you've accomplished a very small thing by tracing me through this—" he indicated Vespasian—"grimy Judas. Certainly I knew he was

following me today. But such was my confidence—"

Thursday shrugged. "Play it any way you like."

"Furthermore, I'm not aware of any official standing on your part."

"Get your pants on, Colonel, and I'll introduce you to a man who has that."

Fathom chuckled but his eyes shifted. "Really, is there any need to bring the police into this—for no reason? I am absolutely innocent of even complicity in l'affaire Papago. I'll admit the circumstances look bad for me. But they look equally bad for you, I would say."

Vespasian murmured, "A point I tried to make before, Maxie. Now suppose you let me—"

"Save your friendship for later," Thursday said.

"Circumstances being thus and so," Fathom continued, "I thought you might perhaps care to overlook finding me. In return, I might—well, supply you with the true facts of the case."

"If you're trying to cop a plea—" Thursday idly spun the bamboo cane—"you have the floor."

Fathom cleared his throat, all oratorical confidence. "As you probably know, I was the private representative of a woman named Irene Whitney. She engaged me last week to purchase one thousand dollars' worth of gambling chits from this George Papago fellow. They were debts incurred by her before the city seized The Natchez. I paid off these notes with no trouble at all."

"Uh-huh."

"I delivered the chits to Miss Whitney at her penthouse on the John C. Fremont Hotel. She paid me for my labors and I considered the matter closed. Then on Monday evening this strange situation arose. Papago accosted me and accused me of lying to him, cheating him. He demanded to see Miss Whitney. He was a bit muddled with drink, but he was so wildly threatening that I eventually gave in and took him to her penthouse."

"Uh-huh."

"It's quite true. That is exactly where I left him, alive and well, if angry. If you're wondering why I haven't been to the authorities with this story, Thursday, put yourself in my boots. I have a slight police record elsewhere and I should have undergone endless inconvenience."

"Uh-huh. Endless. What does this Irene Whitney look like?"

"Oh, a striking woman, thirtyish, black hair like yours, Thursday. Her inclination to flesh doesn't detract from her appeal in the least and she has splendid features, rather oriental." Fathom smiled, man to man. "I dislike compromising a lady with such a revelation as mine but in the final extremity—"

Thursday laughed at him, thinly, and Fathom looked indignantly puzzled. Thursday said, "Well, this is it, the final one. Here's what really happened. The woman you describe is Quincy Day, as if you didn't know. You've worked for her quite a while. One of your assignments was as valet to Perry Showalter some time back. You collected the data that your organization was using to blackmail him."

Thursday pointed the cane at the bureau, at the packet of newspaper articles.

"From all these clippings about Showalter's smashup," he continued, "I gather you're pretty proud of your work. You even began thinking that you were quite a wheel in said organization. So when Papago tracked you down Monday night you went ahead and acted on your own instead of calling the boss first. That was a stupid mistake for all concerned."

Fathom's cheeks were less pink and he lost his breath momentarily. Vespasian, without stirring or changing the cocksure lift of his eyebrows, had suddenly repledged his allegiance to the detective.

THURSDAY went on, "First you found out from Papago that I was meddling in your business. Then you

agreed to take him to Quincy. But when Papago took you to his car he must have said something about mine being parked right in back of him. That did it for George. You slugged him then and there, shoved him into his convertible and threw his bloody hat onto my front seat. Then you hurried back to the bar to phone Quincy and tell her how brainy you'd been."

Hoarsely, Fathom said something that ended, "—guesswork!"

"Made to measure, Colonel. Papago had to be dead when you went back to make that phone call. After he spent all evening catching up with you, he'd never have let you out of his sight. I'll bet Quincy really had a cat fit when she found out what you'd done, didn't she? There were so many simpler ways of dealing with Papago, even to cutting him in. But you couldn't unweave your own idiot answer. So you took Papago out to the alligator farm—or Quincy had one of her staff do it while you pieced together an alibi. The hat was supposed to scare me off and the Papago-alligator publicity was supposed to scare Irene Whitney but—"

"Wait a minute!" cut in Vespasian. His voice squeaked uncertainly. "Maxie, this hat—the one I found—"

"Shut up." Thursday held Fathom's eyes. "You got a better lie handy, Colonel?"

"Maxie, what kind of a frame you trying to—"

"Shut up."

The smile Ellis Fathom tried on was ghastly. "Really, Thursday, I should have you arrested for slander."

Thursday swished the slender cane through the air under the other man's nose. "Bamboo's a talkative wood all of a sudden. You see, you're the first guy of your kind I've ever met who didn't have a weapon handy of some sort—knucks or a sap or even a penknife. This bamboo thing is no weapon and as a dress accessory it's all wrong.

"It's too light for a man your size and too cheap to go with your clothes. You used to carry a heavy walking stick but you broke that over Papago's head. It had to be destroyed along with Papago's clothes and his wallet with that phony card of yours. But you were used to carrying something so you got this cheap affair. Either you're low on funds or it was your guilt complex working or maybe both. Clapp'll find witnesses to prove you carried a potential murder weapon up till Monday night."

The fear graying Fathom's face froze into a mask of unreason. He flung himself forward at his tormentor. Thursday leveled the cane like a rapier and Fathom met the ferrule with his groin. The bamboo bent springily and the half-dressed man doubled on the floor in agony. Vespasian giggled.

"One down," he said.

Thursday looked at him expressionlessly and tossed the cane on the bed. "Get a suit out of the closet," he ordered, as he asked Fathom, "Anything you want to add, Colonel? Better think in a hurry. Otherwise, you're going to the gas chamber and through you I'll get Quincy Day."

Fathom did not try to speak. He panted, his face aging and helpless, and he looked around at the doors which held no escape for him. Thursday and Vespasian had to lift him to his feet and help him slip into trousers and coat. They didn't bother to change his carpet slippers for shoes.

Thursday shouldered him to the doorway and Vespasian twisted the knob nervously, hesitating. He said, "How about the payoff?"

"Later."

"I want it now. I don't like this always later talk. I dealt fair with you, Maxie, and did nothing but favors. Something's going on I don't like. How did I get rung in on this deal?"

Thursday opened the door and got Fathom into the hall. The man, sunk in dull apathy, let himself be guided. Thursday held his arm in one hand and caught Vespasian's with the other. "Because you belong in."

The little man squirmed as they went down the stairs but couldn't shake loose. "I got nothing to do with this stuff except what I told you. I tried to help you. Now you act like you're taking me in."

"You guessed it."

"No!"

AN OLD man in a smoking jacket peered out the parlor doorway as they passed. Thursday shook Vespasian silent. "You got more to tell, Vespasian. Papago dragged you into this case by accident but you belong in. The hat was the tipoff. An honest man would have taken it direct to the cops. An unimplicated crook, which is what you pretend to be, would have destroyed it and kept shut up. But you brought the hat to me because you knew what was going on and you wanted an excuse to see what I was doing about it. Now you know."

They reached Vespasian's car under the porte-cochère. "Okay, see it my way," the little man was saying. "I'm not scared to tell you there's a couple minor details I haven't exactly been waving around. But strictly—"

"Into the front," Thursday said. "Both of you. I'll sit in back where I can watch."

Fathom slid under the wheel and over to the hedge side. Vespasian argued. "Now, look. There's nothing to gain by spoiling my good name down at headquarters when I can tell you right here and now—"

Thursday lifted him bodily and shoved him behind the wheel and slammed the door on him. He climbed into the back seat and said, "Headquarters."

Vespasian twisted around, pleading. "I didn't spill my guts up till now because I was scared. Listen to me! When Colonel Fathom first came around to my joint—"

The tall hedge on Fathom's side of the sedan exploded in a blast of gunfire.

Thursday found himself sprawled on the cement drive without remembering the instinctive dive for cover. The thunder of the fusillade—somebody had emptied a clip, at least—was only an echo now but tardy splinters of glass still fell about him. He couldn't hear. He felt alone.

But he raised himself cautiously to peer into the car. The front seat was a shambles. Shards of windshield sparkled on Fathom who had been knocked sideways, his unrecognizable head down behind Vespasian's back. Vespasian lay forward, hugging the steering wheel, while a trickle of blood coursed down his plaid coat and more blood hung a red veil over his face.

Lights were popping on in the boarding house and a door banged excitedly. Thursday sprinted down the driveway toward a break in the hedge. He charged into the next yard but it was empty. On the other side of the hedge, where the assassin had waited, a dry branch smoldered from muzzle blast.

Thursday ran toward the garage, crossing into another backyard, searching for some trace. The ground was hard and sunbaked. Two houses away a dog barked—he noticed then his deafness was gone—and he raced in that direction. No one was in sight. Then a woman rattled a back door and yelled something at him.

He vaulted another fence, came out a driveway onto Kalmia Street. In the distance he could hear the sirens rising and falling. He spun around, irresolute. Then, welcoming shadows, he began walking swiftly down the hill toward his home.

CHAPTER XIX

THURSDAY, August 11, 11:30 p.m. —— Austin Clapp dented the flowered divan considerably more than Vespasian had earlier. He regarded Thursday with truculent amusement. "Pajamas, robe and good book. Where's your faithful dog?"

"He left me to join the force. Going to take off your hat or isn't this a social call?"

Thursday ambled barefoot into the kitchen and poured a beer for his visitor. He heard Clapp glance into the kitchen after him and then into the bedroom but he didn't give notice. When he took the foaming glass in, the homicide chief had his hat off and was stretched lazily along the divan with his feet up on the arm.

"Thanks," Clapp said and gulped off half the beer. "Well, maybe you don't know about tonight's new business. Hear the sirens?"

"About an hour ago. They don't thrill me any more."

"You poor kid. These would have. A cowboy-and-Indian ambush just up the hill from you. Remember that immune friend of yours?"

"Vespasian?"

"Right. I should have kept my men on him. He turned out to be not so immune to bullets."

"Dead?"

"Not yet. The docs at County Hospital are flipping coins. He took a slug through the right side of his chest and another across the hairline that bounced off his skull. He bled. But the guy with him, name of Ellis Fathom, couldn't be deader. One through the neck killed him, two more removed his face." Clapp described the car-hedge setup. "Somebody wasn't taking chances."

"Who wasn't? And on what?"

"Very funny," Clapp muttered. "Turn on your radio. The news flashes got as much on it as I have. Fathom lived at this boarding house. One of the other boarders saw him and Vespasian leave together just before the fireworks—along with another man."

Thursday was lighting a cigarette. He was proud of the way his hands were disciplined. "That should be a lead."

"Sure, it should. But you know my luck. My witness is an old gaffer with a cataract in each eye. He's doing fine to be sure there was another man, let alone describe him." Clapp swore pensively and emptied his glass. "Fathom used to be a tall gray-haired fellow, expensive clothes, lived in a dump. That's about all we know."

Thursday knew different. Clapp probably had already linked Fathom with Showalter. There was a *Sentinel* final edition on the floor by the divan; the number two story was Merle Osborn's revelation of Showalter's recent financial collapse coupled to obvious hints. But the Showalter suicide would be Benedict's pet case and Clapp wasn't airing the D. A.'s secrets.

Clapp said, "Still, when you add this Vespasian tout who's also got a finger somewhere in the Papago killing, you—"

"You're thinking Fathom might be the guy who was with Papago in the bar."

"Could be. Don't forget there was another man on that scene, too. But why kill Fathom? To shut him up? Or is it vengeance for Papago?" Clapp shook his head. "That doesn't fit too good. Nell Kopke left town this morning. The railroad detectives saw her off with tickets to Philadelphia for her and her kid. Her furniture was shipped to Philadelphia, too."

"You let her go?"

"She wasn't too material a witness. I can get her back if I need her."

"What was the weapon tonight?"

"A .32 revolver. Keating—ballistics—rode along to collect slugs and he said, at first glance, they were fired through a Colt-type barrel. But that covers a good many makes of guns. I say revolver because we didn't find any ejects scattered around where the killer waited behind the hedge. Nickel-jacketed bullets." Clapp lapsed into pondering.

Thursday thought back. Nell Kopke had carried a .32 Colt revolver. But he remembered the bullets distinctly, ordinary unjacketed lead slugs.

The telephone interrupted. Thursday said, "Excuse me," and went out to the kitchen to answer it.

Quincy Day's voice throbbed low and sweet. "I had to call up to apologize, Max," she said. "I do hope you've forgiven me for my performance yesterday."

He squinted at the receiver in disbelief. "I seldom hold a grudge."

SHE said, "One of many good facets, I'm certain. Do you ever get feelings about people, Max? I do. I suppose you'll term it silly—most men do—but I find that most of my intuitions are wonderfully accurate. And I must confess to a very, very strong feeling about you."

"What about me? You're doing fine."

"I should say about you *and* me. I sense a wrongness in our working against one another. It should be the other way entirely. Please give me the chance to convince you, Max."

"With or without cops this time?"

She chuckled disarmingly. "Then you actually haven't forgiven me yet. I don't really mind. I think I'm stubborn enough to win you over. Why don't we have breakfast together tomorrow?"

"Sure. Where?"

"Don't be foolish, Max. Here, of course. My apartment."

"Eight o'clock sound too eager?"

"Just right." She paused, then chuckled again. "I notice that you don't inquire where my apartment is. That's a very encouraging sign. Till eight then, darling."

Clapp was still stretched along the divan, carefully inattentive, when Thursday returned. He said, looking up, "Two to one that was your girl Osborn with the poop on the Fathom killing."

"That's what makes a great detective. Intuition."

"I like a man who respects his elders." Clapp caught himself yawning and sat up abruptly. "I better get it off my chest—why I came. This isn't official, just friendly, Max. Two men have been killed, maybe Vespasian will make a third. Benedict is swearing up and down that you're in this show someplace and he intends to nail your hide to the wall if he can. So if you're holding back anything, now is the time to unload while I can still give you a hand. Later, I might not be able to."

Thursday said gently, "Thanks a lot, Clapp. I appreciate it. Matter of fact, I been thinking similar thoughts all evening. You know how I go for the long chance. But the client I got now is leaving me a little too wide open. So maybe we ought to drop out and have a session with Benedict."

Clapp got to his feet, grinning. "Now you're talking. I'll ring him while you're getting dressed. He's a health fiend, in bed by nine every night."

They drove through the night to La Mesa in Clapp's sedan, a half hour ride which sped them by the dark buildings of the Molyneux Alligator Farm. Behind the foothill community, Clapp turned into a long orchard-flanked road. He muttered, 'Wouldn't you know Benedict would have a hundred and forty-five avocado trees, too?"

Leslie Benedict opened the front door himself; even in dressing gown and pajamas he looked as classically imposing as his Georgian house. He led the way to a prim study and settled into a leather chair with cool condescension. Clapp and Thursday found seats for themselves.

"Well, Thursday—" the district attorney was struggling to keep the open mind he was proud of but his yellowish eyes were hostile as he regarded the man who had broken his sleep—"Lieutenant Clapp informs me that you've had a change of heart concerning the Papago case."

"You can put it that way. I put it that it's my duty as a citizen to aid justice wherever possible."

"Which is certainly high principled of you."

Clapp said, "Let's all of us keep amiable. Thursday's offering some help. I'm willing to hear about it."

BENEDICT'S short mouth puckered and then said slowly, to no one,

"I like to think I'm a fair man. If I've acquired personal prejudices toward a person because of his activities in the last few years, I don't want them to stand in the way of justice. Consider that an apology, Thursday, if you need one." He pressed his fingertips to one eyebrow briefly, massaging that side of his forehead out of shape. "No, I have never looked upon myself as a particular lover of humanity, *in esse*, but I admit I have been disturbed lately. I have been disturbed by a certain brutal significance of recent deaths."

His glance flicked to a copy of the *Sentinel* folded under a paperweight. Uppermost was Merle Osborn's story which made the Showalter scandal public fare. Benedict didn't ask if Thursday was responsible for that disclosure although the thought was on his face. He said, "I'm listening."

Thursday nodded gravely and relaxed in his chair. They were all three on the same team. "This is how I got my foot stuck in the Papago case. Last Monday, at noontime, I met a woman who—"

The study door opened. Benedict was seated facing it and Thursday saw him smile warmly, an expression he had never seen on the man's face before.

Thursday twisted his head around and then rose, with Clapp. A woman stood in the doorway, hesitantly. The skirt of a nightgown floated under the hem of her ruffled blue negligee, pale blue which matched her eyes and emphasized her blonde hair. She said to Benedict, "Excuse me for interrupting, dear, but I thought perhaps you might care for some coffee. I can—"

Her eyes took in Thursday and her clipped voice died away. Her throat tightened, as it had in the house at Loma Portal, where she had called herself Irene Whitney.

Benedict said, "No, thank you, my dear. I'll need my sleep tonight and you know what coffee does to that. Irene, you've met Lieutenant Clapp and this is Mr. Thursday whom he brought with him. My wife, gentlemen."

Clapp murmured something and Thursday supposed he did, too. Irene Benedict's lips were pale but she spoke again to her husband, managed a blankly gracious smile and backed into the hall, closing the door. As the outer shadows fell across her face, Thursday saw her eyes stab at him with a quick desperate appeal. Then he was looking at a closed door.

"Very well," said Benedict, reseating himself. "You became involved in the Papago case Monday noon."

"Yes," said Thursday. His thoughts spun around, pouring from one to another like a waterwheel. He stalled for time, getting comfortable in the chair and searching his pockets for nothing. Benedict was waiting. Thursday said, "Well, last Monday I was approached by a woman. She asked me to protect a little mind-reading quack named Joaquin Vespasian. Her name was Nell Kopke."

Benedict's face showed no expression whatsoever but Clapp wore a small frown. Thursday continued glibly, "I went out to see Vespasian. From him I learned that Nell Kopke was Papago's mistress and that Papago was jealous of this Vespasian. With good reason too, I guess. But, anyway, I agreed to keep an eye out—and that same night Papago's bloody hat was left on Vespasian's front doorstep. Naturally, I took the story to Clapp. Right?"

There was a moment of silence. Then Benedict said, "Go on."

Thursday looked surprised. "That's all there is to tell. I strung along with the case after Papago's death out of loyalty to Nell Kopke. But now I understand that she has left town and Vespasian has been shot so I feel that I am violating no confidences in telling you the whole sordid tale." Thursday spread his hands. "So there you are."

A flush spread under the tan eggshape of Benedict's face and he stood up. He jerked the belt of his robe tighter around his middle. "Do you mean to tell me that I was roused from a warm bed

—the second time this evening thanks to that other killing—to waste my time on your inanities?"

"I'm sorry," said Thursday. "I thought it was pretty unimportant myself but Clapp insisted—"

Clapp slammed to his feet. "What's going on here?"

"That is precisely my inquiry," Benedict said icily. "Why you should find it necessary to burden me with these immaterial facts which you are supposedly capable of evaluating for yourself I fail to see. Frankly, Lieutenant, such behavior argues a deplorable lack of judgment from your department."

"Slow down," Clapp rumbled. "First, let's straighten out a few—"

"Not tonight, please," Benedict cut him off. "I have a full day scheduled tomorrow so if you'll excuse me, gentlemen. . . ."

He was holding the study door open for them.

Clapp started to say something more, halted to chew his lip angrily and then stamped out of the room. Thursday followed him meekly. The homicide chief hunched over the steering wheel and didn't speak until Thursday got out in front of his duplex.

"Nice hot potato," Clapp growled.

"I'm sorry," Thursday said softly. "I didn't mean to lay it in your lap. When I started analyzing the situation for Benedict, I caught on to something I hadn't thought of before. You know how things suddenly latch together in your mind. And there was a confidence involved which—"

"Never mind your reasons. I suppose you got them but they better be good for your own sake. It's your neck, not mine."

"I hope they're good."

"I don't know what you're out to win with cuteness but I bet it ends up nothing more than a taste in your mouth. You won't take home any prizes if you keep kicking the law around. Close the door. I got some sleep to get, too."

"Okay. Good night, Clapp."

Clapp didn't answer and the police sedan roared off. Thursday stood on the curb a moment, watching its tail light disappear and leave him alone in the warm night. He felt tired himself. He sighed and went into his house.

He stayed up smoking and trying to read until nearly three o'clock. He glanced up from the book quickly once with the distinct impression that he was surrounded by a sticky web he couldn't quite see. He warmed up the coffee and it was bitter. He waited for a phone call from Irene Benedict but it didn't come.

CHAPTER XX

FRIDAY, August 12, 5:30 a. m.——A couple hours of poor sleep and Thursday got up to face Friday. He drove to Mission Beach through a hazy rising sunlight that promised another scorching day. The little stucco and red-tiled Papago house sat empty, stale, among the other beach bungalows which were only sleeping to the surf music. Thursday trudged around it, peeping through the curtainless windows at bare floors and walls. He didn't know what he was looking for, only that it seemed necessary this inspection be made.

The steel trash barrels in the alley overflowed with moving-day debris and a half dozen empty whiskey bottles were intermingled with the topmost strata. Through the kitchen window, Thursday could see another fifth on the sink, as good as empty, and a tumbler near it with still a rinse of amber liquid coating the bottom.

The trip was a waste of gas except for the peace of driving. He killed some more time gazing his Olds around Mission Bay back to the city. He put the car in the garage of the John C. Fre-

mont Hotel and sat in a corner of the vast marble lobby behind a newspaper, watching the bank of elevators. The *Sentinel* had closed its forms shortly after midnight but there was nothing important about the double shooting that he didn't know—except for the boldface bulletin which said Joaquin Vespasian would live.

At eight o'clock he discarded the newspaper and took an elevator up to Quincy Day's apartment which was not on the hotel roof but three stories beneath.

"You're giving men the wrong impression," he told Quincy as she took his hat.

"Oh, I hope so, that being one of woman's greatest pleasures."

A quilted housecoat of white silk covered even her wrists, pretending demureness as it flowed down over her obvious figure. Less demure was the zipper track shooting from throat to ankle. She had forsaken her harlequin glasses and high heels; her canted eyes were on a level with his mouth. She stood quite still for the moment, smiling slightly and letting herself be seen against her decor. Thursday thought, the witch at home, and found himself enjoying her presence once more against his better judgment.

It was as if the idea of her probable wickedness were a joke for them both to laugh at and any crimes she might commit merely prankish white magic. Quincy let the stiff period formality of her apartment frame her exotic head in contrast and then, having had her pose, she raised her eyebrows like batwings.

"But what specific instance of giving the wrong impression might you have in mind, Max? The rather impolite curtain I rang down on our last encounter? I'm really—"

"No. Fathom said this place was a penthouse."

"People are so limited in their vocabularies, aren't they?" She linked his arm in hers with an innocent friendliness he found difficult to doubt. "Come along and I'll show you what he meant." But her quilted silk hissed against his coat sleeve in warning.

They crossed the Persian rug of the square haughty living room to french doors, already open onto a small terrace of red cement. A low wall guarded the sheer drop to Broadway and enclosed tiny hedged flowerbeds and four potted fan palms. Above loomed three more floors of hotel and a blue-white sky.

"The management calls it a terrace garden apartment on the bill, I believe. There are only six of them and I had to wait forever on a list to get this one. During the war they all went to generals or admirals or deities at Consolidated—but now it's mine. How do you like it, Max?" She chuckled gaily. "At the first of my occupancy, I completely forgot those windows above until the manager suggested, with the most delicate of coughs, that perhaps the hotel could furnish me a sunlamp if I were really so intent on a tan. Somebody had complained."

THURSDAY started to say that he wouldn't. but she swung onto the subject of breakfast. "I thought we might have it out here. It's perfect in the morning, especially this morning. I abhor going to work. About ten it commences getting hot, though, or I probably never would get to the office and shoulder my burden. Give me your coat. I'm going to put you to work. Besides, I think it's foolish to be dressed at breakfast, especially in California. Back East, there's some excuse for coats but not here. I trust you can wrestle that table outside and the cloth and silver are in the hall closet."

He handed over his coat and grinned. "Now, can I say something, Quincy?"

"Oh, dear, have I been babbling again? Don't tell me you're going to seek refuge in a hurt I-am-company attitude which I think is—"

"What part of back East you from?"

"Can our kind of person say we come

from any one particular place and have it mean anything?"

"Maybe your kind can't. My kind is a local product, traveled at government expense and came home to stay. Why'd *you* leave home?"

"Now, Max—"

She bounced out to the kitchenette and began rattling things. Thursday moved the Queen Anne tea table onto the terrace and set it. Later, he lounged in the kitchenette doorway and watched what she put into the breakfast.

Quincy turned around, skillet in hand, smiling. "Did you give the place a good searching, darling?"

"Uh-huh. Looked pretty normal. I find most bedrooms equipped with photographers these days."

She laughed. "Poor Max! I wish I'd known you better then So much effort and general untidiness could have been avoided—not that I'm admitting anything, understand. How do you like your eggs?"

"Fresh and many. Fathom died a pretty untidy death."

"Business at this hour? I consider three eggs many."

"Three's fine. Vespasian didn't look so hot either. Going to try again?"

"I can spare four. But there's lots else."

"No, three's fine."

He helped her carry the plates to the terrace. He had arranged his chair so he could watch the french doors and the tiers of windows above. There was nothing to watch, the food was good, and Quincy was close and companionable across the little table. He caught himself relaxing warmly under her stream of conversation. She chatted about nothing sincerely and deftly while her violet eyes frankly tried to make friends.

She asked him why he didn't take off his necktie since it was so uncomfortable looking and he found himself obeying.

Then Thursday smiled quizzically. "I just figured out about you."

"Not business," she begged, pouring coffee.

"Just the opposite—your appeal. Ever since I cornered you in your office, I've been wondering why I should like anything about you. Now, don't interrupt for a change, Quincy."

"Yes, sir."

"Your act is to be a wife. It's in your voice and everything you do. You're good looking but not so beautiful that you're out of sight. Your appeal isn't sex, at least not in one hammerblow like other women that have your—well, vitality. You spread yours out, surround the object."

"Like a spider? Max, I hate spiders! But tell me more."

"More like quicksand. I understand that's very restful, once you let yourself go. That's your weapon—that illusion of comfort. The idea that you'll be around forever. What adds the spice is that anybody can tell the whole effect is a wonderful lie. You're ready to vanish."

She smiled complacently over her cup. "Most of that was very nice, Max, and I thank you. Your coffee's getting cold, though."

"Yeah." He twined the necktie around his fist and wadded it into his pocket and had a drink of coffee. He added thoughtfully, "It's a shame to destroy a work of art like you. Which I will."

QUINCY stuck out her tongue quickly and shrugged. "Oh, well. A shame we should have to give battle when we're so much alike, both adventurers with our own secret Hoyles. Maybe I'm wifely to you because I feel sure of you, darling. I've made it a point to find out what you are and how you operate. You're not narcotized by any of the common mores, nor am I. If you were, I wouldn't be interested in you. For Heaven's sake, smile."

"All right. This interest professional or social?"

She set down her cup distastefully. "I should have had better sense than to serve coffee on a day like this. It's so warm." Quincy looked up, her smile

wholly unconnubial. "Zip!" she said and pulled the fastener over her bosom to the waist of the housecoat. Then she widened her eyes, pretending amazement at her temerity.

Thursday chuckled. "Solely for purpose of ventilation, of course. Cigarette?"

"Ventilation—of course. Cigarette—no, I don't smoke."

He gazed at her through his first puff of smoke and then blew out his match. The flame had quivered more than he cared to admit. "Okay," he said pointlessly.

Quincy leaned her chin on her clasped hands and let her eyes wander his face. The quilted silk had opened a pathway less than a quarter inch wide to her middle, more discreet than an evening gown. But the aperture allowed hints of her ivory skin the entire distance with no lacy interruption by any undergarment.

Their mutual silence had acquired faintly the aspect of a duel when Quincy arose suddenly. "Since you're so helpful, let's clear up the table before we doze off."

They carried the dirty dishes into the kitchenette. Thursday avoided brushing against her rounded body and she smiled delicately when she noticed. The next time they passed, she swung in a wide circle beyond him, murmuring gravely, "We're electric." She stacked the plates neatly, rinsed her hands and came to where he lingered in the doorway. "Well?"

He asked, "Still too early to discuss business?"

"Oh, much too early."

He pulled the necktie from his pocket and draped it around his neck.

"Don't," Quincy said and pulled it off again. She slid a plump arm around his waist and leaned her sleek head on his chest. "I'm so bloody lonesome."

"So am I," he muttered.

"Why?"

"You've infected me. You've put yourself across, Quincy. I'm conscious of your position, the way you've got your life jammed crossways in the works. I guess I'm lonesome because I'm going to miss you afterwards."

"*I* trust *you*."

"Don't be silly. Business is business and I got mine all cut out."

She rose on tiptoe because he wouldn't bend his head. Her mouth covered his gently. Afterwards, she whispered, "Why did you come? You didn't have to. Was it just business?"

"That's what I told myself."

Quincy chuckled. "I knew better. I knew it in the office Wednesday. I knew you were all trouble and a mile wide." She took her arm away and came around to stand in front of him, apart. "Kiss me, trouble."

This time he bent his head and tugged her close. The housecoat gaped. Quincy sighed and stayed against him. "Max, did you like the breakfast? Are you glad you came instead of doing the smart thing? Oh, never mind." She rubbed her hair against his cheek. "I talk too much. I know I do. Don't let me talk."

"Won't they miss you at the office?"

"I told them I wouldn't be in. I tell you I felt sure of you, darling. Try trusting me, just for a little while."

Thursday slowly loosed her arms from his neck. He crossed to the door of her apartment and fastened the nightchain. Then he shoved the sofa—it was a Chippendale—across the doorway. He turned to face her across the living room. "When I was a kid, I caught a rattlesnake down our canyon and kept it alive for six weeks. I was crazy about it and it nearly broke my heart the morning I found it dead. But I never trusted it."

Quincy finished unbuttoning the cuffs of her housecoat. She held out her arms to him, her face dreaming, and whispered, "Now you're talking too much."

NEXT ISSUE

The Case of the DANCING SANDWICHES

by FREDRIC BROWN

AN EXCITING SHORT NOVEL

CHAPTER XXI

FRIDAY, August 12, 4:30 p.m.——Quincy slept deeply while Thursday searched her bedroom. He kept an eye on her or on her reflection in the chiffonier mirror while he prowled on bare feet. He found her key ring in one of a dozen purses arranged in a closet drawer. He took another look at what he could see of her in the canopied bed, a bare shoulder, a wild tangle of black hair, before he shut himself in the bathroom with the keys. She hadn't stirred.

He softened a cake of soap and made impressions of all five keys. He wrapped the soap in tissue and padded through the bedroom to the hall closet and dropped it in his coat pocket. After replacing her cleaned keys in the purse drawer, he investigated drawers and cupboards in the rest of the apartment. He found nothing he could make important, including the gun.

It was a pearl handled .32 Colt automatic, in a box in the broom closet. From its oily cared-for condition, he learned that Quincy evidently knew about firearms. The clip was full and the weapon showed no indication of recent firing. Thursday memorized its number and let it go at that since, according to Clapp, a revolver had killed Fathom.

Thursday roamed back to the bedroom. Quincy was still dead to the world, coiled on her right side, both hands under the pillow. He sighed and went to take a shower because he felt grubby. The needle spray didn't wash off the way he felt.

Fingering through the medicine cabinet, he found a half-full bottle of shaving lotion, a shaving mug, a straight razor. Thursday was a little surprised. Quincy's apartment resembled a period exhibit in a museum and this was the first sign he had discovered of a man's occupancy. He felt strangely better; somehow this transferred part of the trespass from his shoulders to hers.

He carried the shaving equipment into the bedroom and arrayed it on a chair where she could see it when she turned over. Then he got dressed.

He was knotting his tie when Quincy said sleepily, "Good morning, trouble." She was watching him from a little cave under the satin coverlet.

"Afternoon, trouble. It's nearly five."

"Clock watcher. Come over here."

He did. After a while, she chuckled and stretched. "I must look a first-class muddle. My brush and comb are on the dressing table, darling." When Thursday came back with them, she was sitting up, smiling ruefully at the shaving utensils on the chair. "I see you found my brother's things."

They both laughed. Thursday said. "I'm an only child myself. But I make friends easily."

"I'll bet you do at that." She stopped combing to slap his cheek lightly. "Something so infuriating about that granite expression of yours would make any woman want to use dynamite. Simply to prove you have a human core."

"You found out."

"Did I? I don't know. I suspect you're not human, really, although probably enough for most of the fools. I think I see you because I'm somewhat like you, Max, constantly thinking of three things at once. For instance, what are you thinking about now—besides my unholy beauty, I mean?"

"It's been a long time since breakfast."

"Well, that's a human enough answer, I guess. And you do have a lean and hungry look. Woman's work is never done." Quincy swung her legs out of bed and slipped into the quilted housecoat. "Why are you so thin, darling? Do you have a high metabolism rate or what?"

"All my rates are high, sweetheart."

"I'm rather famine-struck myself."

She kissed him, gathered up the shaving articles from the chair and trotted

into the bathroom to put them away again. Thursday listened to her shower for a few minutes and then ambled into the living room. He moved the sofa from in front of the hall doorway. He had a contemplative cigarette, his last one, on the red terrace. The fan palms rustled in a harbor breeze and the shadow of the office building across Broadway lay over the terrace like a mock twilight. Below, a brook of traffic hummed lazily by. He smoked and came near to being at peace. But there were the circumstances.

Quincy called from the kitchenette, "Come out and talk to me. I miss you."

HE flipped his cigarette into the abyss and went to her. They met over the ringing phone in the living room. Quincy muttered, "Oh, darn!" as she lifted it. She listened, frowning, and said wearily, "Yes, dear. I suppose so. Oh, when you come bring a loaf of bread and a can of coffee. Regular grind."

She returned to her kitchenette, mouth sulky. Thursday said, "Company?"

"Yes." Quincy didn't look around from the spice shelf. "At least, I do have him trained to call in advance."

She wasn't going to discuss it so Thursday simply waited for the unknown him, a man to match up with the shaving equipment he had found in the medicine chest.

It was Rupert who, without knocking, used his key on the hall door and opened it to the length of the night chain. His gray-suited keg of body bumped to a halt at the obstacle. His fat hopeless face showed first mild surprise and then mild foolishness. He said, "I can't get in."

Thursday closed the door, detached the chain and let him enter completely. The short man had an evening paper under his arm and carried a sack of groceries. Quincy came in impatiently. "That was quick, I must say." She bent her cheek for Rupert's kiss and took the groceries in one gesture. "I should have told you to bring cigarettes, too. For Max."

Rupert offered to go down and get some.

"Never mind now. Dinner will be ready right away." Quincy swept back to her kitchenette.

The two men glanced at each other. Thursday felt embarrassed. Rupert, who apparently didn't, tentatively extended the newspaper. "Care to see the news, Mr. Thursday?"

"Thanks." Thursday sat down in the wing chair and rustled through the pages. No developments in the Papago-Fathom killings had been released, if any. Rupert disappeared into the bedroom and when he returned he had discarded his coat and unbuttoned his vest. He sat down in another chair and folded his hands over his belly, gazing at a corner where no one was likely to appear. He was trying not to disturb anybody.

Thursday read for a while with his eyes only.

Quincy called, "Ruppert, I distinctly told you regular grind. Why don't you ever learn anything?"

"They didn't have anything else, dear," Ruppert said. "I didn't think it would make that much difference."

Quincy's reply didn't carry into them. Thursday's collar was feeling tight so he loosened his tie. He found himself rereading a story about a dog which had awakened, in the nick of time, its owners in a burning house. He flung the paper aside and stared at Rupert. Rupert awaited his words politely. Thursday forgot what he was going to say when it occurred to him that he had been hogging the entire paper. Before he could make the offer, dinner came.

Quincy served them some casserole dish and a tossed green salad on separate wooden trays. They ate and Quincy did most of the talking, addressing Thursday often as "darling" and almost completely ignoring Rupert. The fat man listened attentively to her, smiled when the subject called for a smile and re-

mained unperturbed. The single reference to Night & Day was Quincy's inquiring, "Did things go well at the office?" and Rupert's answering, "Just an average day."

Finally, the ordeal was over. Thursday carried his tray out and returned with his hat. Quincy sprang to her feet in alarm. "Oh, you're not going! The sun isn't even down."

"Wonderful dinner, Quincy. Wonderful day between meals. But I don't want to interrupt your household routine any more than necessary."

"Now don't start being absurd, darling." Her arm crept around his waist and she rubbed her cheek against his shoulder. "Rupert doesn't mind, do you, dear? Besides, he's no doubt going out somewhere himself, to a show perhaps. He often does after dinner."

Her eyes darted at Rupert and he scrambled up obediently.

"Certainly. I intend going to the movies or something."

Thursday snapped, "Why?"

Nobody answered.

"Why? Why don't you tell me to get out of here, Rupert, like any normal man would? Just tell me and there won't be any fuss—I wouldn't have the guts to stay."

Rupert flushed and looked at his pudgy hands before he hung them on his vest pockets. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Thursday," he murmured.

Quincy said, "You mustn't go, Max, not with so much yet to talk about."

THURSDAY shook his head no, a little helplessly. What got him was the unnatural normalcy of the pair. They couldn't see anything was wrong. A sick wondering about himself tightened like muscle over his undigested dinner. They couldn't see anything was wrong, and he was beginning to feel like one of them. He untwined Quincy's embrace and said, "No, I'd rather go. Good-by, Quincy."

She said, puzzled, "Just good-by. Is that all?"

Somebody knocked hesitantly. The woman's eyes darkened suddenly. She jerked her head at Rupert who walked slowly to the door and opened it.

Irene Benedict looked in uncertainly at Rupert. Her patrician face smoothed as she saw Thursday and she walked in to him. "Hello," she said. "I'm so glad I finally found you, Mr. Thursday. I've been by your office twice and phoned several times."

"How'd you run me down here?"

She recited her piece. "I had a late appointment downstairs for a permanent. I saw your car in the garage, near mine. One of the elevator boys remembered bringing you to this floor. I've been inquiring in all the apartments."

"That boy's got a long memory." Thursday smiled coldly. "And you're quite a detective yourself."

Irene looked around at Rupert, then at Quincy. When she looked at Quincy she automatically touched back the crinkly blondness of her new permanent and her small trim body seemed to twist to a more becoming position within its seagreen rayon. Her face made the same maneuver, putting on a charming smile for the hostess. "I'm awfully sorry, breaking in like this," Irene said. "But I've been anxious to see Mr. Thursday all day and I'm afraid I forgot my manners. I'm Irene Whitney."

Quincy pressed her housecoat over her hips, as if welcoming comparison and crooned sweetly, "Oh, no, that's perfectly all right, Miss Whitney. Please don't feel compelled to apologize."

Irene stiffened and the dignified charm froze on her face. Her smile was still fixed flatly as she turned back to Thursday. The words came out between her teeth, "You cheap contemptible crook," and her hand whipped across his cheek.

The slap mark was stinging and Thursday had automatically backed up a pace before understanding set in.

By that time, Irene had whirled on Quincy. "I can hear that voice even in my sleep," she whispered fiercely.

"You're the one, aren't you? The one on the phone!"

Irene went at her and Quincy was taken by surprise, too. Quincy went over backwards, trying to keep her face clear of the raking fingernails, and her head slammed down on an arm of the Chippendale sofa. Irene pounced on top of her, sobbing.

Rupert cried, "Quincy!" and started across the room. Thursday grabbed his arm and took him back to a chair. He sat him down and growled, "We're going to keep out of this one." He anchored the fat shoulder where he wanted it and rubbed the hot place on his cheek with his free hand. They watched.

The fight was swift and vicious. Irene's righteous anger was no match for Quincy Day's experience. They clawed in each other's hair but Quincy used her head to ram at the blonde's face. When Irene's grip was loosened, the other woman began working scientifically with knees and talons. Then Irene's tear-wet face was on the bottom of the tangle, contorted as it probably had not been since childhood.

Thursday said, "Okay. Time."

Quincy was sprawled all over the smaller woman, taking her anger out on the green bolero frock. Thursday jerked her to her feet and put her aside. The black hair was spilled about her shoulders but Quincy looked unhurt. She grinned at him with her teeth and commenced fixing her hair.

He helped Irene Benedict get up and he had to support her a minute while she stopped crying. She was a mess. Scratches oozed a mixture with her tears on one cheek and one eye was swelling. Her nylons were shredded. She had lost a shoe and her skirt was ripped up one thigh. She clumsily commenced to repair her hair, too, as her first gesture before she discovered she had to use both hands on her bolero jacket to be wearing anything above her waist.

The two women glared at each other in the wall mirror Quincy was using and there was no sound except for their labored breathing and Irene's hiccuped attempts to control her sobs. Thursday hunted around for the missing shoe and found it and put it on her foot after discarding the remains of that stocking. Then he inspected his client and sighed.

He nodded at Quincy and Rupert and led Irene into the hall, wondering if the retentive elevator boy would ever forget his departure.

CHAPTER XXII

FRIDAY, August 12, 7:45 p. m.——Thursday drove his Oldsmobile out Harbor Drive at a conversational speed but they had crossed the National City line before either of them spoke. He said, "After we've had our talk, I'll take you back to your car. On your way home, I'd advise you to run into a telephone pole at about ten miles an hour. Just enough to bend the bumper and explain that face of yours. You banged it against the steering wheel. There's no story good enough to account for those peekaboo clothes, so you better sneak in quietly. Feeling better now?"

"Yes, much better, thank you." Irene's head lay back against the seat, letting the evening breeze cool her face. "I think there's a coat in the garage I can use." A blush commenced tingeing her cheeks but she didn't open her eyes to inquire, "Am I still decent?"

"Uh-huh."

"Good. I'm so tired."

After he'd turned down another suburban street, Thursday glanced at her. The scratches weren't so vicious now that they had dried but the dark eye gave her face a ludicrous lopsided look. She had restored some order to her permanent but the bolero dress Quincy had deliberately vandalized was all through as a garment. A drug store

packet of safety pins had helped; however, her shoulder gleamed beneath one treacherous rip and the green rayon wouldn't stay together over her bare knee.

Thursday said, "Let's clear up a few things. Like why I didn't cancel that cat fight as soon as you started swinging. First place, you didn't hire me as a bodyguard. Second place, I was childishly pleased to see you get a lesson knocked into you. You're my client, not my kid sister, and I don't like clients fouling up my plans. Okay, let's hear from you."

"I'm very sorry. For saying what I did and for striking you. But when she spoke in that silky voice— No, I'm not excusing myself, because I should have had better control. I'm very ashamed."

"That's over and done. What I meant I want to hear are a few whys and wherefores about this tangle you're in."

Irene opened her eyes and turned her head to stare out at the palm trees marching along the dark avenue. Her words slow but chopped neatly by her accent, floated over to him. "The tangle is nearly over and done, isn't that it, Max? I can feel it drawing tighter all the time. She said next week would be the end."

"Suppose you start from the beginning."

She revolved her wedding ring but didn't look at it. "We've been married six years. Try to understand that I don't want to appear disloyal to Leslie, no matter what I may say. This is very difficult to explain."

"Do you love your husband?"

"Why, of course." Irene was surprised. "I've never thought—of course, I do. The root of the thing is my own lack of stability, that's all. Leslie isn't a warm person— I don't mean he isn't fine and thoughtful—but he is so absorbed in his work. I'm glad he has important work. He has that. Perhaps if I had children to keep me busy, I'd—well, I don't and so—"

She sat up to fumble in her purse. She produced a folded rectangle of brown leather, its design crudely tooled, half of its edge yet to be laced.

"So I go to leather-working class and other worthwhile projects. That's where I'm supposed to be right now. I'm making this wallet for Leslie. Don't bother to say how nice it is because I know it isn't. It's botched. I'm not even any good at this."

"He'll be sure to like it, Irene."

"Certainly, he'll say how nice it is and probably treasure it. But we'll both understand that it's poor and useless. Oh, Max, I feel so utterly incapable! I want to be part of something, something that's alive."

"So that's why you started gambling at The Natchez?"

"Yes. I suppose it was a sort of revolt. Losing the money didn't matter. It was even exciting being in debt. It was exciting just doing something except club meetings and teas and leather-working class." Irene slid her hands up over her face She didn't cry and when she folded her hands in her lap again, she said calmly, "You asked me something about Yvonne Odler. I know her slightly and don't like her But she keeps calling me, wanting me to join some sort of private art class."

Thursday snorted. "You keep saying no. That's definite professional advice at no extra charge. Tell me the rest of it."

"Where are you driving, by the way?"

They had swung onto a deserted hilly road that meandered through the back country. "Taking the long way around to a friend's house. Tell me the rest of it."

IRENE contemplated the black asphalt ahead. "I gambled under my maiden name—Whitney. I didn't think about the real risk involved until the morning I read that Leslie had raided The Natchez, closed it up. Then it began to strike home, what an idiot I'd been. Max, I was petrified. First, it was because I thought what an awful scandal there would have been had I been caught in

the raid. I didn't even remember the IOUs until quite a bit later. Then I didn't dare to get in touch with Mr. Papago so I let myself hope they had been destroyed. Some papers were, you know. So I didn't do anything at all."

"Papago evidently rescued some of his assets. And evidently Quincy Day already had an eye on your notes from her corner of the web. She bought them up and got to work."

"The evening she telephoned was the most horrible of my life. I never did go to sleep. I sat in bed with my bottle of sleeping tablets, holding them, counting them, actually thinking of taking all of them. But—I didn't have the nerve when it came right down to it."

"That's a great definition of nerve—bequeath your husband two black marks for the price of one."

"I'm sorry. I know better. But I've thought since there's a contagion to something so foul. I was trapped and I had to defeat that voice on the telephone, even to using a worse weapon than hers. If I had been able to kill her tonight—" Irene shuddered. She moved closer to him so her shoulder touched his side. The plaintiveness lay implicit in her touch rather than her voice. "Can one's moral sense be dulled, perverted—just by contact, I mean?"

Thursday grimaced. "I wish I knew. I'm sorry myself, for badgering you." He felt her flinch at his harsh chuckle but she stayed pressed against him. "Anybody that makes loud noises about ethics like I do isn't any paragon, you can bet. So Quincy thought she had a string on the D. A., huh?"

"Yes. That's what I couldn't tell you before you found out who Irene Whitney was. That woman actually believed I could persuade Leslie to give up his investigation of the Showalter—" she glanced up at him swiftly—"suicide. It was a suicide, you know. For the same reason as mine would have been."

"I knew already."

"If Leslie didn't bury the case shortly, she promised to publish my IOUs. Which, of course, would cripple Leslie's career. As a figure of justice he would become a laughing stock, his own wife frequenting those places he's sworn to stamp out. But what that woman could never understand is that Leslie would never agree to subvert justice even if I should ask him. Even if it meant the end of all his ambitions. You see, he's honest. Implacably honest. She couldn't understand that. She laughed."

"Yeah, she would. Quincy's a lousy judge of character. Most crooks are. They understand weakness. That's their business. But strength is way out of their grasp."

IRENE said, "So I called you Monday, after arranging that silliness in Loma Portal, trying to conceal my identity in every way. I hoped you would know a way out, even an illegal way, without harming Leslie. He had spoken of you often."

"I can guess how."

"Yes." She flushed, rattling off quickly, "Let me say here that I no longer agree with him in all particulars. Before I called you, I had gone down to Leslie's office when I knew he'd be out and pretended to wait for him. I read through all his file on you. That's how I recognized your car in the hotel garage today. There was nothing in the file to—well, to give me any idea you weren't—"

"No, your husband isn't in my fan club. Don't worry about it. You hired me and I took you, despite your case, because I liked your looks. I guessed right, about you being an honest woman in a mess. I guessed wrong about you being a good risk."

"So wrong," she said hopelessly. "Next week she'll know I haven't—"

"I don't think so. Quincy already knows you're not cooperating. But blackmail's a bluff so she'll keep hoping, keep calling you. You keep kidding her along." Thursday paused, then went on thoughtfully. "No, our deadline comes when your husband gets hot on her trail. Then she'll realize there's no more

chance to buy him off, and she'll publish your IOUs out of spite. And also to make him look bad."

"Is that true? That we have more time?"

"All depends. Now I understand why the alligators. Quincy wasn't after press notices so much as she was showing off her strength to you—flaunting Papago's body by making a gaudy display practically on your doorstep."

"I suppose. We do live quite nearby and that's the road I always take home. I slowed down to look last Tuesday afternoon because I saw Leslie's car parked at the alligator farm. But I didn't learn about Mr. Papago until dinner time."

"I believe you. Has Benedict gotten anywhere on the Showalter case?"

"I don't know. He's pleased about something but he doesn't discuss details with me. I don't imagine that helps. But—"

"Okay. Don't mean to ask you to spy on your husband."

Thursday turned the Olds off the pavement onto a rutty filling station driveway. They bounced to a stop beneath the overhang and by gasoline pumps that had been slingshot targets for years. Gardens on both sides nourished sagebrush. The ugly box that had been the station office seemed to rust a little more before their eyes. But a dim light glowed in the tiny frame house fastened behind the derelict.

"Where are we?"

"The friend's."

Thursday went around to open her door. She didn't want to go in looking as she did, nor did she want to remain alone in the car. She finally accepted his coat to button around her and he rattled the sliding iron door of the front building.

Presently, a flashlight played over them from inside the shattered panes. A husky voice swore pleasantly and said, "It's the middle of the night, Max. What you been doing to that poor girl?" The door clanked open.

"None of your business, Coffee, and it's just past nine. This job won't take long."

Coffee blew his nose while his unseen eyes studied Irene. "She'll catch pneumonia," he said and led them through the defunct filling station into the lighted cottage behind. He was a gray dour little man in overalls and badly fitting teeth which sneered.

There were no introductions. Thursday dug the tissue-wrapped cake of soap from his pocket and handed it to the older man. "Keys. Five of them."

Coffee inspected the soap impressions. "Too close together. Don't you ever learn, Max? I'll do what I can since you're so earnest. Say, thirty minutes."

"Say ten. I don't want to keep you up."

COFFEE honked again into his handkerchief—it was silk, if frayed—and left the room. His shoes made no noise on the floor. After a moment, the low-pitched whine of a milling machine commenced in a rear room. Irene, sunk in a weedy overstuffed chair by the window, was sniffing with her eyes at the rest of the forlorn furniture and the stained wallpaper.

Thursday said, "Yeah, this is how the other half lives."

"Am I that obvious?"

"You'll admit it's not much like the Benedict manor house and avocado ranch."

"Who is he, Max?"

"Used to be one of the slickest safe crackers in the business. Despite this shack, Coffee has spent more money than you or I may ever see. But his heart went back on him and he decided another stretch in prison would kill him. Smart man. Not many know when to quit."

"What does he do now?"

"Odd jobs. He's a skilled machinist. I use him every so often. Your husband has a hunch other people do too, but he hasn't been able to prove it."

Thursday turned suddenly and picked up the phone, the only shiny object in the room. "I better get back in touch,"

he half-explained to Irene as he dialed. The Telephone Secretarial Service had seven calls listed for him—four from a Miss Whitney, two from a Mr. Meier late that afternoon, one from a Miss Osborn at five o'clock. Thursday rang Merle Osborn's desk at the *Sentinel* but she wasn't in.

Next he called the home of John D. Meier who answered still chewing his dinner. "Where you been? I called you twice."

"So I heard. What you got, John?"

"Notes. Wait till I find them." He left the telephone and came back with paper rustling. "You owe me for a long distance collect, incidentally. Here's a lady and a case that comes close to your specifications."

"You'll get your money. Give."

"Cleveland, 1942. A wench named Hilda Graves tried a public carrier accident fraud. She had the help of some faked X-ray plates plus some testimony by a Dr. Theodore Newman. So Newman goes to prison and Hilda got off. It was a male jury. Sex emerged triumphant. Ain't it wonderful?"

"Good boy. Where's Hilda now?"

"I thought you knew. Cross-index lost her when she kissed her patsy good-by at the jailhouse door. How about some handball tomorrow?"

"Let's make it next week. Thanks a million, John. My best to your wife."

A moment's thought and Thursday looked up the number of County Hospital and tried for news of Joaquin Vespasian.

The hospital switchboard girl said, "Just a moment, please," then he could hear muffled voices in the background. The switchboard girl said, stilted, "Mr. Vespasian has checked out, sir. Who—"

"Checked out?"

"Mr. Vespasian checked out this afternoon. Who is this calling, please?"

"But he was wounded pretty seriously. He was under police guard."

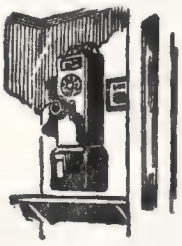
"I'm afraid I'll have to refer you to the night supervisor, sir. What is your name, please?"

Thursday hung up in a hurry and tried to figure that one out.

Irene Benedict, huddled inside his coat, was gazing out the black window, her fine face upturned and rapt. "There's a shooting star," she murmured. "When I was a child—"

He laughed. "We better take up wishing again. Wish me luck."

CHAPTER XXIII



FRIDAY, August 12, 10:00 p. m.——He dropped Irene Benedict in the Fremont garage and saw her off in her own car. Then Thursday drove home. He had barely commenced slouching, his coat over his arm, through the muggy evening to his door when he stopped. Both his and the other apartment of the duplex were unlit but there was an added feel of midnight to the place, a crouched-and-waiting feeling that didn't belong with the ten o'clock his watch said.

Thursday floated across the grass to where he could see the front door. He balled his coat into a throwing object and crept up onto the slab porch to open his screen. A raw sliver hung from a gouging along the door edge nearest the lock. He used his key and let the door drift into his front room. Nothing happened. He slipped inside and around the jamb.

There was a horizontal shape on the divan. The shape was five and a half feet long, dressed in cheap plaid and with a white strip like a label across its head. Joaquin Vespasian lay face up, one arm dragging to the floor. His chest made no movement at all.

With a quiet born of fear, Thursday shut the door. He closed the venetian blinds on both windows before he switched on the lights. Vespasian's face was muddy pale and no longer blended into his tan hair; the features lay stupid in their passivity.

Thursday picked up the dragging arm and searched the wrist for a pulse. Vespasian flinched and his owl eyes rushed open, staring. Then he giggled.

Thursday used his pentup breath to swear. When he ran out of words, he frowned and poked a curious finger into his guest's chest. It was plaster-hard.

"Cast—down to here," Vespasian wheezed, working himself up to a sitting position. "Say, what kind of a dump do you run here, anyway? Not a drop of the old poison anywhere."

"You're lucky I don't have the weights on your feet by now Mentally, I had you halfway down to the bay."

"No drink?"

Thursday snorted at him and said, "Just sit still." He circled through the house, giving it a light going-over. He found nothing planted. In the bathroom, his adhesive tape, iodine and scissors were sitting on the back of the washbowl and Vespasian's discarded head bandage was lying on the floor. Thursday cut it into bits with the scissors and flushed it away. He scrubbed the washbowl clean of stains and put his first aid supplies back on the shelf.

Vespasian, on the divan, tried to look in pain and insulted and clever all at the same time. "What you got to cry about, Maxie? I'm the boy who's had nothing but trouble ever since I met you."

His expression resolved into a single one of self-pity as he stroked the new tape strip he had fastened along his hairline.

"I got ten stitches here and a crease in my skull. I got two fractured ribs and a road through both sides of my chest I'm a material witness in a killing. Maybe in two, since the cops'll probably hold Papago against me now. All this since you come nosing around." He rubbed his arms thoughtfully, then winked. "But Vespasian was in a coma. He never did get around to talking things over with the law."

"You're pretty cute," Thursday agreed. He put on his coat.

"What you doing that for?"

"You're a fugitive. I need some credit down at headquarters. Let's go."

"Don't get silly!" Vespasian flashed. "Why do you think I came here? I got talking over to do with you. A deal, Maxie. First off, I need some cash."

"Everything's free downtown. If they can't hold you in the hospital, maybe they can in jail." Thursday clamped down on an evasive arm.

Vespasian winced and squirmed and tried to stay put. He half-whimpered, "Just because you're big and tough, don't throw it around. Lay off!"

THURSDAY suddenly released the little man's arm. Vespasian was holding his hand cupped and Thursday, watching, reddened—as if reflecting the blood that filled the hand. Vespasian said, "Yeah," accusingly and got out a soiled hankerchief for a sop.

Thursday growled, "Okay. You're wandering around like you're healthy enough.'

"Don't show off your muscle so much after this." Vespasian played his triumph for all it was worth. He unstudded his shirt cuff and slowly pushed up coat and shirt sleeves together as far as they would go. His thin fuzzy lower arm was painted with iodine; the flesh was pocked with a half dozen small jagged holes, newly scabbed.

"Buckshot?"

"Buckshot, bright eyes. I had to come somewhere, so I came to you and you kick me around. I loused up your front door, breaking in, but I had to get those things out. That's what I been doing in your doniker, operating on myself with your lousy dull scissors. Also fixing up my head less obvious." Vespasian rolled his sleeve down. "Now, you want to discuss?"

Thursday flopped across the big chair. "Okay, discuss."

"I sure like your soft heart," Vespasian said acidly. Then he shrugged and grinned like a monkey. "I guess once a cop— Well, I felt pretty safe in the hospital, a guard outside my door

and my window three stories up. But right across from my room, on the new wing, there was a fire escape that looked square into my window.

"About four-thirty this afternoon, I just had a feeling. You know, eyes staring in. I rolled out the other side of the bed and—wham! Somebody used a shotgun on my bed where I was supposed to be unconscious. When the cop came in to yell and wave bye-bye through the window, I grabbed my clothes and took out down the hall. Do you blame me?"

"Who was behind the gun?"

"How should I know? I decided to move and then came the noise—wham! Me stop to get acquainted? This boy doesn't operate like that." Vespasian winked. "Funny thing, all this psychic phenomena stuff I been dishing out these years—here I got a real life-and-death hunch myself. Anyway, I dressed in the bushes outside the joint, walked a million miles down here and jimmied your front door with a chunk of hinge I found in your neighbor's trash. See, the cops got all my valuables sealed in one of those envelopes, including my small change. I need a few bucks to—"

"Pretty story. Now let's see how true it is." Thursday went out to the kitchen and dialed Merle Osborn's desk at the *Sentinel*. She was in.

"I called you from the hospital about five, Thursday, sweet— No, not a shotgun. A 12-gauge riot gun. Here's the payoff. It was stolen from a prowl car this morning— Yes, premeditated— Let *me* tell *you!* This somebody lugged the gun up the fire escape to a third floor landing opposite this Vespasian's room. At four twenty-five, our somebody pumped three fast charges through the victim's window and departed down the fire escape again, leaving the gun.

"Eye witnesses say the assassin was a man, between four and eight feet high, either dark, light or albino. Minor confusion, as usual, but definitely a man. I've been in Vespasian's sick room and I don't see how he managed not to get subdivided. But he not only stayed in one piece, he evacuated under his own power and has since been seen as far north as Bakersfield. Now, my angel, what have you been doing today?"

"This and that." He wished she hadn't asked that particular question.

"You sound guilty. You wouldn't by chance have Vespasian there, would you?"

"Would I call you about him if I had him?"

"You might, being the sly sort of beast you are. Don't worry. I won't give you away."

"Better not. Who'd take you to dinner Monday?"

"Oh, Thursday, how nice! You're so masterful." She hung up and Thursday returned to the living room.

Vespasian laughed, staccato. "Heard the same story, didn't you, Maxie?"

"Approximately," Thursday said. He took the little man's hand and, holding the shirt cuff down, gently worked the coat sleeve up a few inches. Vespasian sighed.

THURSDAY said, "Except that there are shot holes in your shirt sleeve that match those in your arm. Which explains the psychic way you missed the blast. You were already dressed and on your way out the door, carrying your coat, when everything happened. How'd you expect to get by the guard?"

"Him? He was half asleep. And so was I supposed to be, remember. Also I was wearing a white jacket thing I found in my closet. I would have made it, shotgun or not, depend on me."

Thursday sat down and rubbed the arch of his nose and considered the little man for a while. His gaze flickering under the scrutiny, Vespasian muttered, "Well, Maxie, I guess you want a better story."

"I sure do."

"Okay, look at it this way. I wanted to help you."

"Uh-huh."

"I was going to tell you all this, anyway, so you don't have to look so smart.

You see, I was kidding the other night when I said I turned Fathom's offer down. I took it. I got regular pay for information I could pump out of Nell Kopke. Being so close to Papago, she had a good line on what high up San Diego folks were in debt at The Natchez. That Irene Whitney female Fathom mentioned last night—she was one. Just what use he made out of this stuff, I don't know."

"Why'd you sell out Fathom to me?"

"Why not? With Papago dead, I saw he wasn't going to be needing me any more."

"Nice. Your charity's getting you jittery now, isn't it, Vespasian? You're finding out that Fathom has friends. You haven't."

"Maxie, I got you."

Thursday snickered and Vespasian pressed anxiously, "You think it's right, you leaving me take this alone? The Colonel blew off a lot when he was doing business with me, playing the big guy." He said gloomily, "I wish I could remember something worth remembering."

"Oh. So now that ambush by the boarding house wasn't necessarily for Fathom, huh? Instead, maybe his friends have tried twice to kill you. That makes you pretty important."

Vespasian's lids veiled his pop-eyes. "I might be," he said.

"Why?"

"I don't know. I just might be. So I was going to leave the hospital and find Fathom's bunch and reason with them. Maybe I even had an idea I could line up with them. Then that shotgun went off and I decided I didn't need their money that bad. So I came to you."

"What do you think you know that's so important?"

"I said I don't know. If I could think of it, I'd be tickled to sell it to you. Right now, all I want is protection."

Thursday chuckled. "Swell. All I want is the applause I get from Clapp for turning you in. Unless you think mighty fast."

"You think I haven't thought, Maxie? Me, I'm one guy who likes to know why he's marked." Vespasian smirked. "On the other hand, as long as you take care of me, I won't be able to tell the cops you were that unknown third on the party when Fathom got his."

They smiled politely at one another, matching eyes. Then Thursday laughed shortly. "Check, Vespasian, it looks like we're going to make a deal at long last."

"Sure we are. My body's gotten this important, I'm going to make something off it or—" He giggled. "I nearly said, or die trying."

Thursday fished in his coat pocket and drew out a set of five freshly cut keys on a loop of twine. He walked over and dropped them into the outstretched hand. From his wallet he drew a ten dollar bill to lay over the keys.

VESPASIAN said, "Ten won't get me far."

"I don't want you to get so far you won't come back. You run an errand and then I'll stake you to a hideout. You walk from here till you find a drugstore. Buy one of those dollar porkie rain hats to cover that tape on your head. After that, ride the bus but no taxis. You won't be noticed on a bus and, besides, the bunch that's gunning for you owns a couple hack drivers."

Vespasian nodded. "Where am I going?"

"Place called Night & Day. On the sixth floor, Bank of America Building. There are two private offices. In one should be a small locked file. I want a list of all the names in that file. I want it tonight. I was figuring on going myself but I'd rather send you. The keys ought to carry you all the way. Provided you have no objection to burglary."

"Provided you don't mind my talking if this turns out to be a frame."

They exchanged another pair of smiles. Thursday said, "We trust each other. But if all the names should start with A, I might think you copied them out of the phone book."

HE gave Vespasian five minutes start. Then Thursday turned off the living room light and left the house. He drove across town through Balboa Park, keeping an eye on the rear view mirror for possible company. By the time he turned onto Thirtieth Street he was sure he hadn't any. He cruised by Vespasian's place once to see if he could locate any police spotters. He couldn't. The stucco ice cream cone loomed into the night as a lonely misfit ghost.

Thursday parked his Oldsmobile a block away and walked back to the alley that led behind the cone. He carried what passed for a tire iron among his car tools. The first window he tried jimmied easily. He climbed in.

The three rooms of the circular building were surprisingly unsinister to search. Feeling cosy and unapprehensive, Thursday did an extra thorough job. It took him an hour, till nearly twelve, and he didn't find a thing. He even untacked all the pinups from the partition behind the bed to see if there were any writing on the back. The checkup completed, he lay across the bed and had a cigarette while he did some thinking. He didn't think of a thing.

The telephone jangled. It seemed to shriek at him.

Thursday got to his feet, his sense of security bursting at the seams. The phone rang again before he got it.

There was an assortment of noises in his ear, through which an operator cut with, "Deposit fifteen cents for three minutes, please."

A nickel clanged. Behind that, he could hear an irregular buzzing sound like a telegraph key. At that secondary depth of sound, a man laughed triumphantly. There was a pause and the sonorous broken buzzing began again.

The second nickel clanged. Someone was breathing heavily into the receiver. Distantly, Thursday could hear a jukebox playing a tune, one he hadn't heard for some time.

The third nickel clanged.

No one spoke. Thursday prompted the other end with a muffled, "Hello?"

Nell Kopke said thickly, as if her lips were pushed against the mouthpiece, "I'm gonna kill you! You hear me?"

Thursday grunted. He didn't know whether to chance a giveaway by speaking or not. Nell made the decision. She said, "I will!" and hung up. He was left with the unhelpful buzz of a clear line.

He departed the ice cream cone by the back door. He thought about Nell Kopke during the drive home. She had been drunk, possibly doped. She had been under emotional stress. For some reason, Joaquin Vespasian was on her list under Enemy.

And, most important, she had not gone to Philadelphia.

The lights were still out in the duplex and Vespasian had not yet returned. Even before he locked his car, Thursday heard his own telephone ringing. He raced for the front door, got it open and stumbled through the dark to the kitchen. The phone kept calling to him.

It was Quincy, though she was speaking so rapidly and so softly he didn't recognize her at first. "Max—you're there. I was so worried when you didn't answer. You've got to help me. I'm scared, scared to death. I'm all alone—"

"Slow down and talk up, Quincy. What's the trouble?"

"I don't dare talk louder. He's here—in the apartment. Max, what can I do? He intends to kill me!"

"Look, it's past my bedtime. If you want your hand held, try—"

Her voice shook and rose to a nightmare octave. "Max, Max darling, don't say that! You've got to believe me *now*. I haven't any time. He's going—" Her words suddenly were stifled. A crash at the other end of the line sounded as if the telephone had fallen to the floor. There was silence.

Thursday hammered the cut-off bar. "Quincy! What's happened? Quincy!"

More silence. Then, softly, someone replaced the faraway receiver.

CHAPTER XXIV

SATURDAY, August 13, 12:30 a.m.——Feet apart on the soft hall carpet, he stood and considered the door to Quincy Day's terrace apartment. The door, blankly supercilious, absorbed and halted his distrustful gaze. Thursday tried its brass knob. It was unlocked and he let it glide away from him into a beyond which was unlighted. He stayed out of the aperture it left. Only a little of the hall light entered.

Then he smelled the gas, a smell he could almost see pinching his nostrils. He held his breath where it was and went in, closing the door behind him, striding quickly toward the dim shape of the french doors. He hurriedly opened them wide and stepped out on the terrace for a new lungful of air.

Immediately he left the open glowing night-dark for the doubly smothering dark of the apartment. He jostled period pieces in his hasty prowl to the kitchenette and the hissing rose louder in his ears.

He slapped on the overhead light and twisted off the oven burner of the spotless little stove. The oven door was open, a shelf under Quincy's upper body. Her head was within the enameled cavern, her cheek on a wire grate. Her full body, limply in a praying position, was clad in red lounging pajamas of heavy silk.

The jacket was fastened diagonally across the front by gold monkey heads with rhinestone eyes. Thursday angrily wondered why his mind should be caught up by those when he had enough to do coughing the cloying air out of his chest and hoisting the dead weight of the woman into his arms.

He stumbled back into the living room with her, dropped her on the Chippendale sofa, used the sofa as a pushcart to trundle her into the broad welcome opening of the french doors, found the living room lights and returned through the brightness, which seemed to dissipate the gas, to her body. Quincy was still breathing.

Thursday rolled her over on her stomach and knelt beside her, his big hands deepening the labor of her diaphragm. Her flesh was no less silky than her pajamas under his grasp. At the top of her neck, just below where her black hair swept up into combs, her white skin showed a blue-mottled bruise.

Quincy gasped out a senseless little cry and tried to raise her head. She hadn't yet opened her eyes. He left her vague stirrings and went back to the kitchenette where the last traces of gas still stung his throat. From a cupboard of bottles, Thursday selected the scotch and a double-ended jigger.

"Here, Quincy. Drink this." In his absence she had gotten over on her back and her eyes of bottomless black stared at the ceiling as if it were falling. The eyes rolled toward him now and took on a reasonable depth. He angled a sofa cushion under her head and tipped a jigger of whiskey into her mouth. She strangled, came out of it and he poured a second down her.

A long way off, her voice said, "Max. Thank you."

"Have another. Make you feel better."

"Lock the door."

He did. When he came back to the sofa, she had inclined herself a little higher on the cushion. She bent her knees so he could sit down with her.

Quincy's eyes were lightening to a more normal purple. Her lips trembled up into a smile, scarlet against her pale cold-looking face. "I still can't think. Oh, darling, you're wonderful. I didn't know what to do. What's that smell?"

"Your next month's gas bill."

"Was—" She tried to think about it and her hands were automatically busy arranging her pajama jacket so it covered her stomach. She shook her head, uncomprehending, then winced and felt the back of her neck. "Oh, yes," she whispered.

"Take your time. The night's young yet."

"Let's move the sofa back to where it belongs. No, let it stay here. I don't care." Quincy suddenly spun around so she could lean back across his knees and cling to him, her face against his chest. He put his arms around her shaking shoulders and he held her that way for some time, until she said, "I'm all right." She slid up so her cheek brushed his and their eyes and mouths were warmly close. "Darling," she said.

Thursday patted her gently. "Suppose you tell me about it, sweetheart."

"I've gotten in deeper and deeper. Believe me, Max, I didn't arrive at this point intentionally. I didn't plan for this. I didn't realize where I stood until you walked in on me the other day and walked out on me the other night."

"Quincy, blackmail is built. You don't slip into it like a puddle."

"No, yet . . . I don't pretend I'm an angel. But I haven't seen. Try to think of me—well, as a bill collector. I don't start anything; I don't end anything. I begin when the people are already in debt. Oh, I know what you're thinking but try to see that from the middle, where I've been standing, both beginning and end are out of sight. Especially if you don't care to look."

Her eyes dropped away from his, hastened back. "Tonight proves that I can never quit. I've always thought of that, put it off, but—don't you see?— I can't! I need your help so very desperately. But how can you help? They nearly killed me tonight. The next time . . . They have every minute to try. I can't watch every minute!"

"Over the phone you said *he*."

She ducked, physically, and her voice was muffled against his tie. "Did I? I was nearly frightened senseless. I meant *they*."

"Positive?"

"They, two of them. Men I'd never seen before. One a little fellow with white hair, towheaded. The other was bigger, bulkier, with almost no chin. I answered the door and they forced their way in and locked me in the bedroom. I could hear them—no, not quite hear them—talking about what to do with me. Then, suddenly, I remembered I had carried the telephone into the bedroom to use earlier. It was horrible, Max. My hand could hardly dial. I suppose they heard me. They came—" She lifted her face and its wan smile. "The rest of it you know better than I, darling."

"Yes."

QUINCY'S tropical eyes drifted shut and her mouth swelled tenderly, ready to pay. Amused, Thursday sighed over her face. The moment carried him into the past, into Wednesday, when Yvonne Odler had been making him at home in *her* apartment. Same moment, same lies, his same reaction.

Thursday stood up and Quincy tumbled down his legs to sprawl on her Persian rug. He said, "You turned on a little gas to smell up this place. When you heard me open your door you stuck your pretty head in the oven and turned on some more. No hired killers would debate over what to do with you or leave you alone with a phone or set you up for such an easy rescue after you'd tipped me off. And quit fingering that bruise. I saw you get that this evening when Irene knocked you back on this sofa arm right here."

He put on his hat.

"No, no!" Quincy grabbed his legs and began to cry, rubbing her forehead against his knees. "Max, I lied, I lied. Forgive me or don't forgive me, but listen to my reason."

"Why so much trouble to tie my hands?" Thursday asked. "A bullet would shut me up, that's the simple way. Or are you scared of my record, scared I might throw a few back? You might be right so don't try it. No, what I really think is that you don't care much for murder as long as you can scheme up something trickier. How long before you run out of schemes?"

She flung back her head and looked

up at him. "Max, how can you say those things to me? How, after today?"

"You mean yesterday. This is another day, Saturday." He flushed at his own stupid evasive argument. She waited, knowing. He stared down at her eyes which glistened pitifully as did all the rhinestone eyes of the monkey heads across her jacket. He growled, "You kept me entertained all day so I couldn't interfere with something else. What? Was it while somebody moved your blackmail goods from Night & Day to a better hiding place?"

"I can't deny any evil you want to think, Max. But there was more. We told each other then, we both knew it then. Why don't you answer me? Don't use the word love if you're afraid of it, darling. But you know we had more than our subterfuges. I did and you—"

"Okay," he snapped. "Don't maul it around."

"You're ashamed."

Thursday said, more gently, "No. Confused, maybe, because I didn't ask for you to be the way you were—are—but I'm not so confused I can be stopped. You haven't changed the sides any or redrawn the lines. They're still there. No, I'm not sorry I stepped across. I am sorry you can't be rescued from where you stand. But I can't do that."

"I see." Quincy rose to her feet, facing him while she dried her eyes with her forefingers. "All right. I can't do anything but throw myself on your mercy and hope that you do—well, feel something towards me."

Still gently, he said, "What's the truth, if any?"

"No attack, of course. I staged it but not to tie your hands in any way, Max. You're right about my scheming and my trickery. How do you think I've lived my life? I need your help and I had hoped to gain your sympathy."

"And you're hoping now, aren't you?"

"Yes," she admitted. "I have everything to gain, feeling as I do about you. I know your position is exactly opposite, for I do think you feel something, too. Don't answer. I meant what I said before about quitting. And what I pretended had happened tonight *will* happen—unless you can stop it. And I'm not terribly certain about that. I know him too well. He'll never let me leave him."

"Him?"

She whispered, "Rupert," and Thursday grunted. His dropping glance saw her clenched fists against her hips.

"You don't believe me, do you?" Quincy smiled tightly. "You don't believe that I can be this frightened of him. Simply because he doesn't look—"

"No, he doesn't."

She backed away one step. "Very well. Please forget I said anything." Her breathing was suddenly audible. "You'll remember that, won't you—please, darling? I didn't say anything!"

"Don't worry." Thursday said absently, squinting. "Where does Rupert hang out when he's not here?"

First, she shook her head violently. Then she caught her breath. "He has insomnia. He roams the streets at night. Sometimes he drinks in an after-hours place at the back of the Liberty Hotel. I don't know if he'd—"

"I'll look." Thursday went to the door. She didn't follow. The view of her apartment that stayed with him was Quincy's oblique eyes, larger than he'd ever seen them, staring after him.

CHAPTER XXV

SATURDAY, August 13, 2:00 a.m.——The woman was a blowsy fifty, gaunt, and she wore a kimono she had bought in the days when Japanese kimonos were bought. She blocked the open crack of the hotel's back door. "Kitchen's all closed up, my boy. What'd you think?"

"I think you got me wrong."

Her eyes still said cop. Thursday flashed his wallet, the card that confirmed his private license. She flipped

through the rest of the wallet, finding nothing that disagreed. "No trouble?"

"No trouble, Mother. Just a drink."

"Got to be careful." She closed the door to unchain it, then let him in. He followed her through a storeroom of crates and wilted vegetables, feeling just fine about his occupation. He might look honest but proving he was a private detective showed the world he wasn't.

The dozen men and women in the big hotel kitchen glanced at him curiously as he entered. They seemed smaller than they should, dominated by the black stoves and cumbersome serving tables and high greasy ceiling. The suspended light bulbs beamed down cruelly, making their ordinariness ugly.

They sat uncomfortably in low-voiced couples or groups on wooden folding chairs. Each held a water tumbler of liquor and there were three open bottles on a butcher block near a faucet. Bourbon, scotch or rye, with or without water. The kimono brushed Thursday's elbow like a grimy butterfly. "That'll relieve you of one buck, my boy."

He paid and took his tumbler and strolled over to Rupert, gathering a chair en route. The fat little man sat by himself in a corner behind one of the cold grim stoves. Thursday unfolded his chair and seated himself close to Rupert's right arm.

Rupert looked up, no surprise in his mild smile, and went back to studying the linoleum pattern.

Thursday set his drink on the floor out of the way. "Joint like this is a godsend for an insomniac, isn't it?"

"Yes," Rupert agreed. "Nights can stretch pretty long. Are you troubled by sleeplessness too, Mr. Thursday?"

"I'm troubled finding time to sleep."

"In that case, I don't understand why you bother with this." Rupert's round belly bounced with a one-syllable chuckle in advance of his making a little joke. "Then again, if you were seeking the most agonizing chairs in the world, you came—"

"I was looking for you." His left arm pressed more firmly against Rupert's pudgy right one but the man made no movement. "Quincy told me where to find you and suggested a couple things I should do when I did find you. But I wanted to chat first, Rupert. Do you have a first name, by the way? Not that it matters. What's half an alias between friends?"

"As you say, it doesn't matter. Excuse me." His right arm stirred suddenly as he transferred his drink to his left hand and then drained the glass. "I don't imagine it matters to anyone.

"It started as a shakedown case but it picked up a pair of murders on its way, like a snowball. You know what happens to snowballs when they get this hot. Something that matters now is who is going to take the rap. In this state, they don't melt that person; they gas him—or her."

"I agree with you, Mr. Thursday. That does matter."

"Nice that our views coincide somewhat. Now do we agree that I hunted you up as a friendly act?"

"If so, I wouldn't understand."

"We both know what Night & Day is, Rupert, and that you belong. But Quincy is measuring you for the entire rap. That's my friendly warning. You're getting built up as the mastermind."

Rupert pursed his lips moistly and silently inspected his empty glass. He cleared his throat softly. "Thank you."

THURSDAY said, "I wouldn't let her drop you again, sucker. She's all ready to: she's been ready since Showalter made the headlines. She's giving you the identical treatment she gave you in Cleveland in '42, Dr. Newman. That time you went to prison to protect Hilda Graves. Protecting Quincy Day will take a lot more out of you."

Rupert said again, "Thank you."

"You're a big boy now, Doctor, too big to be a football no matter how pretty the foot. I nearly split a gut when Quincy announced you were the brains

of her outfit. You're not smart enough and you're not man enough."

The taunting didn't take. The fat man blinked occasionally but no spark lit his meek colorless eyes.

"Why do you stand for it?" Thursday asked. "You don't think she loves you, do you?"

Rupert said, as if to soothe him, "Now really, Mr. Thursday, I don't believe I care to discuss it, if it's all the same to you."

"You were there tonight, according to the elevator boy, just before she got the great idea of phoning me up. You don't have insomnia, Rupert—you just don't have any place to sleep half the time."

"Please, Mr. Thursday—"

"It gets difficult to feel sorry for you so why should I waste my time on it? Go ahead. Take the fall for that tramp. She's got you tabbed right."

Rupert's bulk stiffened. His neutral voice was imperative for the first time. "Don't call her that."

"Nicest word I could think of. I wouldn't want this mixed company to overhear me calling that slut a—"

Rupert shifted suddenly, his right hand diving into his coat pocket. Thursday's hand streaked after it, down to the cool hidden metal of the automatic. His finger got inside the trigger guard, behind the trigger so it couldn't be pulled. He could feel a roll of bloated waist against his hand and the soft finger in front of the trigger which Rupert wouldn't remove. The two men sat stiffly side by side, both with a hand buried in the coat pocket.

Thursday breathed, "Let go," and Rupert's face only jelled into stubborn folds. "Okay, then." Thursday commenced bending the unseen gun upward, stripping Rupert's trigger finger back toward its chubby wrist. There was a soft pop of sound.

Rupert bit his lip and his face sagged in defeat. Thursday withdrew both their hands, without the gun. The swift vicious conflict had attracted no attention. On the other side of the stove, a middle-aged man and a young girl bubbled the same conversation as before.

Thursday said softly, "That'll keep you from doing anything you ought to think twice about."

Rupert stared at him a moment, as if there might be something in the detective's face he wanted to know. Then he looked down again, at his broad thigh where lay the hand with the broken forefinger He looked at it as he looked at everything, submissively.

As Thursday rose, he picked up his tumbler of whiskey and fitted it into Rupert's good hand and got another, "Thank you."

The slattern in the kimono called out, "Come back again, my boy," as Thursday crossed the kitchen. At the doorway, he looked back at Rupert. The whiskey was finished already and from the hopeless way Rupert's head drooped forward Thursday guessed he was crying.

CHAPTER XXVI

SATURDAY, August 13, 3:00 a. m.—— Thursday was hanging his coat in his closet when the knock came. He let Vespasian in. The little man slipped past him and glanced quickly into the other rooms. Then he said, "Just protecting myself," and took off the cheap tan cloth hat he had bought and scratched around his tape. "I was waiting across the street until you got home, Maxie. Didn't want to beat up your front door any more."

"I saw you being inconspicuous behind the bush."

"You might have given me the high sign."

"And spoil your fun?" Thursday held out his hand. "Produce."

Vespasian tossed him the keys Coffee had made. "One opens up the building, one opens all office doors to this Night &

Day outfit, and one opens a special little file in one of the private offices."

"Which office?"

"The one marked Mr. Rupert."

"What happened to the night watchman in the downstairs lobby, by the way?"

Vespasian smirked. "He was called away by the noise of a breaking window. Nothing to it, Maxie."

"The list."

"The money."

Thursday gave him two more tens. In exchange he got a long torn strip of buff-colored paper. The column of names was pencil-written in a flamboyant hand.

From his wallet, Thursday unfolded the brown envelope flap on which he had copied the names involved in Don Kerner's cache. He sat down by the coffee table and began comparing. On the back of his neck he could almost feel Vespasian's puzzled frown. The checking of names took five minutes and the two rosters matched except for order. The Vespasian list was shorter by one name than the Kerner list—Perry Showalter.

"Well, Maxie, I guess I better get on my horse." Vespasian shuffled nervously and Thursday grinned up at him.

"Worried? You're in good standing for a change."

"Yeah, but how come you had those same names already? What was I doing risking my tail if you already had them? Maxie, you wouldn't be setting me up for something?"

"No, of course not," Thursday said softly He crumpled the original list, the one in his own handwriting, and set fire to it in an ashtray.

"I just wouldn't try it, brother. I got a big mouth on occasion," Vespasian added.

"Don't fret. And don't rush off."

Thursday fingered the shiny side of the heavy paper Vespasian had used, absently read the watermark: TITE. The paper folded bulkily, taking up a lot of room in his wallet.

"Why didn't you write on a piece of linoleum and be done with it?"

"I didn't know you wanted it on high-class A-1 monogrammed stationery. I just picked up the first piece of paper I found lying around the office. Any more questions?"

"Let's see." Smiling, Thursday rose and patted over Vespasian's pockets. The little man sighed submissively. From his shirt pocket, over the cast, Thursday drew a sheaf of bills. He counted them. "Two hundred and forty-four dollars. Where from?"

Vespasian winked. "It happened to be lying around in the old cash box, my friend. You wanted this deal to look like a burglary, didn't you?"

Thursday peeled off thirty dollars and stuck the rest back in the shirt pocket. "You don't need my chicken feed. Okay, on your way. Suppose you hole up in the Old Spanish Auto Camp, on Pacific by Cudahy Slough."

"Sure," Vespasian said. "Call me there."

Thursday smiled. "I wouldn't waste my nickel. You're about to drop out of sight on your own. I don't think you trust me, Vespasian."

"Why, whatever gave you that idea, Maxie? I love anybody that puts me in the way of two hundred and fourteen free bucks. I'll be there."

"You keep lying. You're not out of bait yet."

VESPASIAN unwrapped a stick of chewing gum thoughtfully. "You're almost right, Maxie. I got one gimmick. I got a reason somebody wants me dead. But until I can remember what I got I don't know how to spring it. I'm going to hide and think until it comes to me."

"Then you'll go out and let them finish blowing you apart."

"Maybe." He popped the gum into his mouth and began chewing while he grinned contemplatively at Thursday on the divan. "And maybe I'll apply the old gray matter this trip. Maybe I'll let you spring the gimmick for me—if we can arrange terms. I'll call you." Vespasian opened the front door.

Thursday said, "You been pretending not to know who Fathom's friends are. Y. I discussed that point with the late colonel right under your itchy nose. The somebody who wants you stuffed and mounted is Quincy Day, his boss."

Vespasian jiggled the door lightly by its knob. "I thought you'd passed that over. Well, here's the straight dope. My angle—"

"You'll find she's a charming lady with a gang and hardly any blood on her hands at all. She lives in the Fremont Hotel. You go ahead—run over and tell her you put the finger on Fathom and robbed her office. Make a deal. I got a hunch I'll make great strides once you're a body and not fiddling up the facts any more. Good night."

"No!" Vespasian burst out. "You got all the wrong slant, Maxie. I'm just taking care of myself, watching out for number one. Look, I'm going to cut you in once I think of what I got to think of." His lips worked up a fleeting confident smile that looked ready to snap under the pressure of some vague fear. "You wait."

Thursday yawned. "Good night."

"I'll call you sure. Well," Vespasian pulled his cheap hat lower, glanced outside, hesitated as if he wanted to say something more and then vanished around the edge of the door.

Thursday got up and bolted the screen and locked the door and turned off the living room lights. In the bedroom he looked at his alarm clock. Three-thirty. He grimaced and set it for eight and got ready for bed.

A long time later he was still awake, staring at the indefinite reaches of the ceiling. It was too warm to sleep under anything more than a sheet and that weighed on his lanky tense body heavily. He tried to like himself, what he was doing, and couldn't. He wanted a cigarette but couldn't bring himself to get up and it touched his mind obliquely that smoking in bed was against the law. At that he laughed aloud, harshly. The sound hushed itself in the dark.

The day the Whitney case had commenced lapping around his ankles he had made Irene quite a noble speech about ethics. Since then he had tampered with evidence and lied to the authorities. He had even hidden Don Kerner from the law, although the law didn't know it wanted him yet.

No, Thursday reflected, he hadn't exactly trod a moral path this week. He tried to remember where he had turned off the main road. He had taken Irene's case because he had respectd her and wanted to protect her from an insidious business. Thursday snorted; at the time, he also wanted to spread his reputation around among her rich friends. "No use playing Galahad at this time of night," he muttered to himself. The facts were: once in the case, he had gotten mad at the exortionists and intended to break them one way or another.

He couldn't convince himself he had played completely fair even with his client. For Quincy was the enemy and his interlude with Quincy hadn't been strictly in the line of duty. Confusing, when he liked both Irene and Quincy as abstract persons.

Yet—he had advanced his client's interests somewhat by using Quincy. He sighed and tried to make up his mind whether he really needed that cigarette or not. But all he could concentrate on were the most intangle aspects of means and end. He was still convinced that the end he had in view was right and proper. On the other hand, his methods thus far weren't. They would never be, even with that right and proper end achieved. But—did justification matter? Clapp would think so but Clapp, admittedly wiser, was also in an official position where a certain amount of principle was forced upon him. Clapp didn't think that any moral result could be obtained through immorality.

"Neither does Thursday—in theory," Thursday comforted himself. Clapp said that this tricky stuff always ended up as a bad taste in your mouth. Thursday told himself that at least he wasn't being

unbendingly righteous, there was that. He yawned with disgust at his misplaced whimsicality, thought he was ready to sleep, found a comfortable position and was immediately more wide awake than ever.

Protect Irene. And, incidentally, protect her husband. That was irony with bells on. *Find Nell Kopke.* Find why she had gone through the motions of leaving town. That was the obvious next step. But would the discovery of Nell Kopke have any bearing on the really vital problem? The vital problem was to find the *key.*

Murder was murder but Thursday also had the client's interests to look after first. So—the key was most important. Somewhere within reach was a theoretical strongbox where Quincy had locked her store of blackmail evidence including the Irene Whitney IOUs.

Thursday pondered drowsily. Quincy undoubtedly kept the stuff in a Night & Day safe during calm periods. She would have moved it to a hideaway when the trouble started. Where?

He doubted that the mythical key was one of those copied by Coffee. No, Quincy wouldn't leave such a key lying around her apartment. And the key didn't necessarily have to be a metal one with wards and webs; it might well be a cardboard claim check or a few words over the telephone.

Find the key . . .

UNDER the visions of a thousand kinds of keys, Thursday fell asleep and when the keys began to jangle that was the alarm clock saying eight o'clock. He had got an hour's sleep.

He padded groggily out to the kitchen in his pajamas, drank a glass of water, lit a cigarette and sat down over the telephone.

First and needlessly, to give his head time to clear, he dialed Yvonne Odler's apartment at The Devonshire. After a long ringing, she said "Hello" sleepily and he hung up. It gave him a small mean pleasure and it confirmed what he had been sure of, anyway. People named Odler didn't go to jail.

To his next call, Merle Osborn answered just as sleepily. He bantered gently for a few minutes before getting to the point. "There's favor you can do me, honey. I think there'll be a minor burglary report on the blotter today. Night & Day for some two hundred bucks. Suppose you play it for ten times more than it's worth. Detailed interviews with everyone connected with the organization and lots of pictures of the staff and office interiors and so on. Then give the thing all the nice black *Sentinel* publicity the traffic will bear."

"Well—it can be done. But an awfully good question occurs to me, darling. Why?"

"I'm up to something."

"Why, you smug devil you!" Merle drawled. "Always the operator."

He grunted, irritated by the truth. She had jabbed with the same needle he had used on himself all last night. "It's for a good cause," Thursday said drily "No holds barred in some fights, you know. I'm trying to scare somebody and any opening I can throw something at. I'm going to do it."

"Well, for heaven's sakes, don't get mad, Thursday! I'll do it for you but you better go back to bed and get up right."

He calmed down, they talked some more and after she had said good-by, he called the local office of the State Board of Equalization and asked the secretary for Samuel Ulrich, please.

"Sam, there's a favor you can do me."

Ulrich's laugh boomed in the receiver. "I haven't got one thing else to do, you know that, Thursday."

"Don't worry, you won't have to turn a hand. I want some legwork from your dry spies while they're out making sure the liquor customers are over kindergarten age. Or maybe one of your boys will recognize the bar I have in mind."

"If it's a bar in the county, one of the bunch will have been in it. What's the details?"

Thursday paused, marshaling his

facts. He was certain it was a bar Nell Kopke had phoned from last night because she had been drinking then, as she had since Papago's death. He said, "Well, it's some place in the fifteen cent phone toll district. That narrows it down to Del Mar, Jamacha, San Ysidro, Jamul or some highway joint near there. There's a pay phone but I don't think it's in a booth. Right next to the phone there's a pin ball machine—one of those that buzzes every time your marble bounces off a post. And there's a jukebox but it isn't very near the phone. Oh, and the jukebox still has Freddie Martin's 'Polonaise' on it."

Ulrich said, "Whew," and laughed again, unroariously.

"Can you ask around, Sam? It's pretty important. I'll fork over ten bucks to whatever dry spy gives me a lead, double that if the lead pays off."

"Boy, they'll jump at the deal, being on government wages. Me, you owe a drink to, Thursday. I'll ask around. Since it's Saturday, the bunch'll be in and out. This is our busy day. I'll call you."

"No, I'll call you from time to time, Sam. Thanks a million."

He put the phone away and deliberated what he wanted to do next. Taking a hint from the quality of his thinking, he went back to bed for a little more sleep.

The doorbell woke him at four-thirty.

Thursday opened the door and faced three men. One he didn't know, one was a burly man from the D. A.'s office named Barnes and the third, the leader, was Ed Wales. Wales gave his shallow young grin and said, "You certainly do sleep late, Max. You must have a secret of success." He looked self-satisfied.

"Come on in," Thursday growled and unbolted the screen. "What's Benedict's beef now?"

The trio filed in. Wales said, more seriously, "He's a square shooter, Max. He dislikes you personally so he's leaning over backwards to be fair."

"Get to the point."

Wales frowned pompously. "Mr. Benedict thought you'd agree to a private chat in his office before you were booked."

Thursday stared. "Booked! On what charge?"

"Suspicion of murder of Ellis Fathom."

CHAPTER XXVII

SATURDAY, August 13, 5:00 p.m.——The district attorney's office was as shabby as most in the eighty-year-old county courthouse. A corner room on the first floor, its high narrow windows pierced one drab plaster wall for a view of Front Street and the side of the Pickwick Hotel, and pierced another to show the courthouse lawn where sailors loafed and watched Broadway's passing sideshow. It was a shabby office and only Leslie Benedict's cool presence behind his desk invested the place with lofty aims.

Thursday sat in front of the dark old desk, lighting a cigarette and hoping the dampness he felt on his forehead would be attributed to the waning heat of the day. He told himself he wasn't exactly worried; but he was worried that he ought to be worried. Behind him, he could sense every breath of big young Wales who stood sentry by the locked door. On the other side of the door stood a uniformed patrolman. Barnes and the other D. A. man had returned to Thursday's house to exercise their search warrant, having delivered him here.

Pulling a spotless ash stand nearer, Thursday smiled across the desk. "Well, any time."

Benedict's short mouth said, "I presume Mr. Wales explained to you the reason for my procedure in dealing with you. If you feel you'd rather summon your lawer, we can proceed with formal arrest and booking."

"No. I'll play."

"Very well. I want to give you every chance to answer the allegations beforehand because I am personally prejudiced against you, Thursday. I'm convinced that you killed Ellis Fathom. However, Lieutenant Clapp, with whom I consulted because of your close relationship, maintains the possibility that you are merely withholding valuable information. I say *merely* in a comparative sense."

"Okay. You want to horse-trade."

His yellow eyes flickered and Benedict said, "Not at all. I want truth."

Thursday sucked stolidly on his cigarette, wondering how much more weight he could carry alone. Barnes and the other man would find nothing in his house. But he had two items in his pockets that would come to light when he was booked. The copied set of Quincy's keys probably wouldn't mean anything to anybody. But in his wallet was the list of Quincy's extortion victims. Of course, it was in Vespasian's handwriting but it might be very damaging.

Thursday could feel the two men watching him think. He shrugged casually to prove he wasn't bothered and tried to weed out his facts. How much was excess baggage? What could he shed without endangering— Irene gazed back at him from a new silver frame on her husband's desk. The photograph was evidently new, too, since she was wearing her hair as she had last Monday. He hauled in his wandering mind and tried to consider the *now*.

"Well?" Benedict asked curtly.

"Oh, you waiting for me? I thought you were going to explain how I killed Fathom so I could start knocking over your ducks."

Benedict folded his hands—the polished perfect nails irritated Thursday —and led off.

"The finest cases sometimes are woven from hundreds of details. In this instance, we not only have this web of matching minutiae but it is sustained by certain dominant strands, solid bases which I doubt you can explain away. A very principal basis, Thursday, is your own record. You're a known killer. You've killed four people and got away with it."

"The coroner gave me a clean bill of health," Thursday said wearily.

"Certainly. Self-defense. Justifiable homicide, although I detest the term. The victims were criminals. But the fact remains that you have had no compunction about taking human life in the past. And there we have an extremely vital strand on which to build the rest—predisposition."

"You're making me feel better, Benedict. Before you started talking I thought you might have something."

"I have. Let's first examine the murder of George Papago. Here is where the constant sifting of police reports begins to develop the whole. On the night Papago was bludgeoned to death, Officer Gannette found you prowling around a car which was parked two blocks from the bar where the victim was last seen alive. The car has since been identified as belonging to the victim."

"Maybe you're talking about a man answering my description and one of a thousand Chrysler convertibles."

"A man of your description—very well. Detail number two—this man of your description followed Papago for several hours that evening, expressing every intent of overtaking him. According to eyewitnesses at the bar in question, McCloskey's Shining Hour, you did overtake him and induced him to leave the bar with you. I've arranged that you meet those witnesses in the regular lineup this evening."

THURSDAY chuckled. "All I'm getting out of your opening address are signs of overconfidence and a lot of confusion. Aren't you going to tag me with the Fathom killing?"

"I'll come to that. Detail number three —the day Papago's body was discovered you brought the victim's bloodstained hat to Lieutenant Clapp with a trumped-up story. This maneuver obviously

sprang from your congenital braggartism and desire for newspaper publicity."

"Except that I didn't bring any hat to Clapp. I uncovered a legitimate suspect and forced him to turn in that evidence."

"Suspect? Undoubtedly. But accomplice is a more inclusive word. Especially since this Vespasian disappeared from County Hospital under rather mysterious circumstances. We're quite anxious to hear *his* story of the Fathom ambush."

Wales put in, "If and when we find him alive."

"So I doubt if you're counting on much support from this Vespasian, Thursday. I'd be willing to guarantee that you've put him out of the way by now, which would make your third attempt on his life."

Thursday laughed. "Time was when your badgering might have riled me, Benedict. Not any more. Any time I need a laugh, I'll think back to this session and thank you."

Benedict's smooth face didn't change. He proceeded as if he were dictating a letter. "So stands the Papago case with those three salient and damning details. You'll grant there are links between Papago and Fathom, three links. Yourself, the Papago-Fathom meeting at the McCloskey bar Monday night, and Vespasian's unexplained connection with both affairs."

"I'll grant the last two."

"Now let's examine detail number four. This morning Mr. Wales, with a proper warrant and accompanied by other of my investigators, entered your office in the Moulton Building. We took this action upon complaint by a daughter of one of our leading citizens."

"That would be Yvonne Odler."

Wales grunted I-told-you-so. Benedict looked at Thursday reproachfully as if he shouldn't have spoken the name so flippantly. Thursday stared back while he stomped out his cigarette in the ash stand and lit another. He asked over his shoulder, "What did you find, champ?"

Benedict answered for his assistant, icily. "The point here is not what my investigators found but the nature of Miss Odler's complaint. For some time you have been blackmailing her by means of lascivious photographs for which she was induced to pose."

"Photographs you didn't find don't make much of a case, do they?" Thursday blew a smoke ring across the desk. "You know this reminds me of a double-action frame that happened to an acquaintance of mine in San Berdoo. He was a private cop, too, and he was getting in people's hair. The second half of the rig is all that applies here. These hairy people had a phony client leave some hot material in his office for safekeeping and then the so-called client showed up with the cops later. But he had caught on and burned the pictures fast, and since he hadn't taken a retainer or signed any receipts he was in the clear. Lucky for him, too."

Again Benedict's expression didn't alter and Thursday began to wonder what big thing he was reserivng to win this duel. Behind his back, Wales murmured, "Frame. Now where have I heard that before?"

Thursday snapped, without turning around, "Probably in court, every time you cross-examine a private cop. Some ex-cons get licensed here and there so that makes crowbait of all of us."

"Persecution complex," Wales said.

Thursday snorted. "Let's compare a couple examples. Me and Yvonne Odler. Through a leak you would deplore, Benedict, I've learned that last Wednesday the untouchable Odler was picked up on a morals charge that was backed by plenty of evidence. But she's sobered up and let loose, probably with an apology. Today I'm arrested and my layout is searched on that tramp's say-so. I'll go out of here cleared but with another crack in my reptuation. Since reputations are pretty fragile in my business, I make a good defenseless target."

"No such leak exists," said Benedict calmly. "You gained that information

first hand. You see, the remainder of Miss Odler's allegation declared that when she was no longer able to pay you extortion, you entrapped her in her apartment last Wednesday afternoon. You were attempting to tarnish *her* reputation, as revenge or as an example, I suppose. You were assisted by an accomplice, Abe Shahan. Shahan has confessed, Thursday. He admits to being your assistant, to taking the photographs you destroyed and to aiding in said entrapment. Shahan is still under detention, of course."

"And I still say frame, Benedict. Abe Shahan's being used to run me off the road, which ought to prove I'm on the right road and dangerous. Shahan gets a big payoff and the parole system will cushion his fall. Meanwhile, my word as a legitimate businessman is canceled by that of Shahan who is a known criminal." The last was an easy guess.

"He is," admitted Benedict, "but his story is corroborated by Miss Odler's statement. She isn't—not on your say-so."

"Naturally, Miss Odler will be completely protected by your office. Mystery Witness Points Accusing Finger, et cetera."

BENEDICT smiled briefly. "You would know the jargon. Now we see the motive taking definite shape. It has long been my suspicion that a well-organized exortion ring was operating here in San Diego. The Perry Showalter suicide provided the first concrete lead and we are tracing others. For example, I have here a report concerning an incident at the firm Night & Day where you obviously terrorized the owner, Miss Day. I don't doubt that she'll develop into another valuable witness against you and there'll appear many more now that the ball is rolling."

"Isn't that your first compliment, Benedict? So I'm the brains."

"You may consider it brains, I suppose. Yes, this office believes you to be the man behind this outbreak of extortion. It's a pattern which occurs not infrequently among men of your so-called legitimate profession. You murdered Papago because he was interfering. You murdered Fathom, who was once Showalter's valet, because he knew too much.

Thursday grunted unbelievingly and shook his head, mimicking a daze. "I've never seen conjecture piled this high before. I think you're sick, Benedict. You've got obsessions."

"Indeed? You've been anxious to narrow this discussion down to the actual circumstances of the Fathom murder. Very well. Detail number five—Ellis Fathom was shot to death with a .32 caliber revolver. On Wednesday morning in your office, according to the report of Officer Hoover, you claimed possession of a .32 caliber Colt revolver. This despite your repeated statements in the past to this office and to police headquarters that you neither own nor carry a gun. Which you are not licensed to do, incidentally."

"I turned that license back in, of my own free will, nearly a year ago. Don't twist it."

"That's by the way. You did have this revolver and you did admit ownership. That's a matter of record."

"Keep it coming."

"Detail number six—a man of your description was seen hurrying away one block west of the Fathom shooting which occurred within easy walking distance of your home. According to Lieutenant Clapp, you have no worthwhile alibi for the time in question. Correct me if I'm wrong."

Conclusively, Benedict unlaced his fingers and leaned forward on his desk, face grim.

"Detail number seven—during Mr. Wales's investigation of your office this morning, he discovered a bullet imbedded in your wall. He extracted that bullet which, being stopped only by a map mounted on beaverboard and old plaster behind that, showed clear striations for identification purposes. It came, you told

Officer Hoover, from the .32 revolver you claimed as your own. The ballistics report proves conclusively that the bullet was fired from the same revolver you used to kill Ellis Fathom!"

CHAPTER XXVIII

SATURDAY, August 13, 5:30 p.m.——The room was stifling and the walls at that moment seemed to move in on him. Thursday could feel his facial muscles stiffening grotesquely. Benedict now leaned back in his chair and observed. He had made his point and was quietly pleased with the result but he did not gloat because he was all business. Thursday wanted to go over to the Front Street windows which were half-raised and drink in some air. But he also didn't want to give himself away any more. Somehow, he smiled woodenly, saying, "For a moment there you threw a real scare into me. Don't think I haven't got answers, though."

Then he realized he was talking right through Wales's comment. ". . . puzzles me, Max, is why you didn't extract the bullet yourself and, say, substitute an unincriminating slug. Of course, such action would have ruined your wallmap as I had to do. I imagine you thought the original hole would go without notice since it was pretty small. I only discovered it myself by merest chance."

"I didn't think it was important," Thursday said. "Shouldn't that prove something?"

Benedict shook his long head.

Thursday again glanced involuntarily at the cool unscreened windows but took a deep breath where he was. He didn't have answers; there was no answer to circumstances. Quincy's attempts to tie him up were kid games compared to what he had accidentally done to himself. He lit another cigarette, stalling, knowing Benedict knew it. He said, "Well, the .32 in question belongs to Nell Kopke," and told the story of Wednesday's incident swiftly.

Benedict rationed out another small smile. "That hardly fits the facts. You simply happen to know that the Kopke woman owned a .32 caliber Colt revolver. We were already aware of that since the gun is registered. But you haven't taken into consideration that both woman and child left Dan Diego before the Fathom shooting."

"Yes," Thursday said, "she shipped her furniture east and left on the streamliner with a long ticket. But she didn't have to change to the eastbound in L. A.; she could have changed to anything that brought her back south, and she had the time. What if I told you Nell Kopke was back in town?"

"I would say you were attempting to gain time."

Thursday grunted, selected another card. "Joaquin Vespasian can prove I didn't shoot Fathom."

"Indeed? And where is Vespasian? Do you know?"

"No. But I'm the only guy in town he might let find him. Suppose you give me twenty-four hours to bring him in. In fact, twenty-four hours will let me wrap this whole case up for you."

"You're bargaining." Benedict's skin darkened angrily. "I don't care for bargaining, Thursday, as you know. I want truth, verifiable truth."

THURSDAY shrugged. He didn't go much himself for the idea of counting on Vespasian as a witness. While he thought over the remainder of his hand, he said, "And when I'm on ice, the really criminal element will keep giving you the runaround. I'm getting tired of the drip-drip-drip of your personal dislike for me, Benedict. You're too honest to frame me but you're taking every advantage of some silly coincidences."

"I am well aware," said Benedict stonily, "of the contempt you hold for my office and the law in general. As for any personal—"

"I've worked pretty well with some legal branches in the past. Isn't that entered in my file? Or isn't there a credit column?"

You may have worked with the police when it furthered your own devices. As for any personal animosity, I am giving you every opportunity to explain your appearance of guilt. If you haven't any explanations grounded in fact—well . . ."

"Okay." Thursday grimaced morosely. "I'm throwing my insurance policy into the pot and I hope you have sense enough to use it right. Two days ago I had a guy tucked away in the Coronado jail for safekeeping. He's a local photo studio man named Don Kerner and I had him booked under the name James Donald. Get him over here and listen to him name a few real names in this blackmail mess. He's all yours and you can claim you uncovered him yourself. I promise I won't tell the papers different."

Benedict sat still, his cold gaze playing over Thursday. After a moment, he murmured, "Very well, we'll see," and lifted the nearest telephone receiver.

Thursday looked around at Ed Wales who smiled pleasantly and emptily. Thursday lifted a corner of his own mouth and turned his back on him again. He stared into the eyes of Irene's photograph, wondering. Outside his mind, he heard Benedict's indistinguishable droning into the phone. He wondered whether Kerner's testimony would be enough to get him twenty-four hours of freedom. With a couple breaks, he might be able to trick Quincy out of the IOUs—with a couple breaks and a little time to set up something.

Benedict hung up and Thursday raised his head. The district attorney said, "The prisoner booked as James Donald is no longer in the Coronado jail. Bail was posted for him this morning by a man named Rupert. So this so-called witness—Kerner, you called him? —was set free."

"Huh?" Thursday felt the slow sinking begin in his stomach. The walls moved in on him again and the air was hot and thick, not enough to breathe. "They found him after all," he said to no one in particular.

And no one in particular was listening. The other two were gazing through him, Benedict dispassionately and Wales as a reflection. Benedict said, "So suppose we cease talking about non-existent testimony and discuss tne possibility of your making a formal statement."

Wales added, "Or do you have another ace up your sleeve, Max?"

Thursday said, "Let me think a minute." He tore his eyes away from the picture of Irene Benedict and got heavily to his feet. He moved toward the windows to get some air into his constricted throat.

Wales said warningly, "Now, I wouldn't attempt anything foolish."

AFTERWARDS, Thursday told himself he wouldn't have thought of it alone. Afterwards, he told himself he wouldn't have acted on Wales's suggestion if the big young man hadn't strolled across the office after him and laid a restraining hand on his shoulder.

But the physical touch of the closing trap was too much. He lost his temper. Growling, he spun around and smashed a fist into Wales's smile.

Wales reeled b a c k w a r d, crashed against Benedict's chair and they both fell to the floor.

Deep in Thursday's brain there was no reactive picture of what he had done. The single impulse there and throughout his body was to be free of the narrowing walls. He thrust the window higher, vaulted and felt the sting on his feet as they splatted on the courthouse sidewalk outside.

He began to run, sprinting across Front Street into the Greyhound Bus tunnel behind the Pickwick Hotel. In the cavern, he slowed to a speedy walk and came out on the other side of the block.

Four minutes later he was at the Plaza, boarding a La Mesa bus.

CHAPTER XXIX

SATURDAY, August 13, 7:00 p. m.—— Quickly, Irene Benedict let him enter her cold classic house. "I heard," she said. "I halfway expected you."

"I'd like to hear, too," Thursday said. "Where's the shortwave?" He sensed the blonde woman's unwillingness as she turned and led him toward her husband's study. Reproach even rustled in the skirt of her black frock.

Her voice floated back over her shoulder, flatly. "You told him? About me?"

"No." In the prim study, he pulled a chair up before the massive console radio and began searching for KGZD on the shortwave band. "I needed a safe few hours—" he chuckled mirthlessly—"and this is the last place he'd look for me." The radio façade was warm and he asked," You been using this thing?"

"Certainly. I sometimes do for amusement. That's how I knew about you."

The toneless voice of the police announcer rose and Thursday listened. He found it hard to believe the impersonal announcements were about him.

". . . suspicion of murder. This man may be armed. . . ."

He sighed and turned the volume down. The search was still centered in the metropolitan area. They had impounded his Olds. A prowl car had been stationed by the Moulton Building.

Irene's pale blue eyes were looking down at him—the swelling had gone from the bruised one—and her lips were tight against her teeth. "That's why you're here, isn't it? To use me against my husband." Her words rattled at him like a snake. "It's useless, you know. The threat of scandal would never stop Leslie. Furthermore, I shall deny anything you might tell him. I'll chance that my gambling notes will never be used and deny that I ever hired you. Now I'd prefer that you leave."

"Thanks," Thursday said softly. He rested back in the chair and stared up at her until she looked away. He said, "I happened to escape from your husband's office because I lost my temper. It's the most foolish move I've ever made and unless I can go back with something in my hand, I'm cooked for sure. I thought about you a lot while Benedict was sewing me up.

"I was wondering whether I could count on you coming forward—voluntarily—to support my word if things got really bad. I see I couldn't. But I would never have used you as a life preserver any other way. I'm an honest man myself though you'd never know it—not at the bottom of this pit I dug trying to save your pretty hide."

Irene turned away. Voice muffled, she asked, "Then what do you want?"

"Just a telephone, sweetheart," She nodded slightly, her back toward him. He got up and went over to sit on the desk. "I asked our district attorney for twenty-four hours to clear this mess up. I was bluffing at the time. Now—" He dialed.

The Telephone Secretarial Service had one important call listed. A Mr. Joaquin Vespasian had called his office at six o'clock but had left no number. Thursday had mixed feelings about that. mostly frustrated ones. Vespasian sounded ready to deal again. But there was no way to bait the little man into the open without advertising his own whereabouts which was impossible because of the police net. Deadlock.

He tried Quincy's apartment and no one answered. He called Merle Osborn, told her to stick by a phone because he might need her, and hung up on her worried pleas to take care of himself. He called Coffee and two other trusted contacts and told them the same thing.

It made him feel better to build this apparatus around the county, to pretend he wasn't alone tonight. Finally, he faced the important call, the one he kept putting off. He dialed Samuel Ulrich's house and talked for a moment with a

baby sitter. Then he caught up with Ulrich at a party at the Officers' Club on Harbor Drive.

THURSDAY'S heart skipped a beat when Ulrich's gay liquored voice said, "One of the bunch knew just the place. I expected you to call all afternoon, thought of nothing else. This roadside tavern fills the bill. Wall pay phone and pinball machine. Jukebox and 'Polonaise' at the other end. My boy's a Martin fan. Maybe you know him. A fellow name—"

"Fine. Where's the place?"

"A mile, maybe two, north of San Ysidro on 101. Tavern called the Lucky Monkey for no discernible reason. Reasonably law-abiding too, I understand."

Thursday said, "Thanks a million," and shut him off. He replaced the receiver shakily. A lead towards Nell Kopke meant quite a bit tonight. She might have nothing vital to tell but proof that she had not gone east would prop up one of those assertions he had made to Benedict. He looked at Irene's trim back. "Want to help?" he asked quietly.

"Certainly, Max." She turned to face him with a shyness that sat awkwardly on an older woman. She got her eyes up to his. "I don't know how to act under a strain. I know my responsibility to you but after a point I can't allow—not to Leslie—do you understand what—"

"Skip it." Thursday grinned, not feeling like it. "Don't analyze. Get a coat, and a scarf to hide your hair. I want you to drive me to San Ysidro. Let's see, if we take that little road through Sunnyside and Bonita, that'll bring us out on 101 without going inside city limits. Odds'll be with us."

The Mexican border was seventeen miles south of San Diego and San Ysidro was the tiny town a mile north of the border, inland but officially a port. In Irene's blue Buick convertible they rode through a half hour of mysterious citrus groves and moonlit dairy farms before sighting the sky glow of San Ysidro.

"Pull in here," Thursday said. A brighter glow flashed on and off from the sign over a barnlike structure beside the highway. The light bulbs spelled out Lucky Monkey Tavern.

Leaving Irene in the car, he went in to join the Saturday night customers. He bought a beer for show and struck up a leering acquaintance with a satin-slacked waitress. She primped and leaned her blouse over his table and eventually she talked.

Ten minutes later, when he climbed into the convertible beside Irene, he said, "Turn around and go back toward San Diego, about three-quarters of a mile. A woman and small boy, strangers in town, have rented a place called the Dickey ranch."

Irene obeyed silently. When he said, "There," she turned off the highway onto a rutty lane and they jounced between broad weedy fields that had been plowed some time ago but never planted. She murmured, "No lights in the house."

"This may be nothing except a ride. I don't know," Thursday said hopelessly. He squinted ahead at the run-down cottage on top a barren knoll. Then he squeezed the woman's arm and she stopped the car a hundred feet short of the house.

In the shallow ditch beside the lane stood a tiny figure, his big eyes gleaming into the headlights like an animal at bay. It was Georgie, his pinched face dirt streaked and uglier than ever from crying.

Thursday jumped out and strode over to him and the youngster cowered. Thursday said, "Georgie, remember me? I'm a friend of yours."

THE youngster whimpered and looked around. Irene brushed by Thursday. "You're frightening him, Max. He's terrified, the poor child, out here alone in the dark." She said soothingly, bending toward him, "Come here, darling. It's all right."

Georgie hesitated, staring around at the ghostly night. Then he flung himself

forward into the woman's arms. She stroked his wild black hair and hugged him and whispered, "Poor child." Then, fiercely, "Doesn't anyone take care of him!"

Thursday said, "Find out if he knows where his mother is."

The boy's face was buried in Irene's coat and he had nothing but dry sobs left. She spoke to him gently.

"She won't say nothing!" Georgie choked. "Mommy won't talk to me!"

Irene said, "Max, we'd better not upset him any more."

"I've got to find her."

"She won't talk to me!" Georgie mumbled against Irene's breast. "Mommy's sick or something!"

Watching the two clasped together in the headlight glow, Thursday felt a chill. The little grimy hand gripping Irene's shoulder had a dab of red color between the fingers.

"Wait here." He got a flashlight out of the glove compartment and stalked up the slope to the little house. The door opened to his touch and his beam played inside. The pool of light froze after a single sweep.

He knelt beside Nell Kopke's body.

For an unknown time, he was without thought. His hard face bowed over the form on the worn carpet, and he felt only compassion and his eyes burned.

When he rose, his teeth bared in a snarl but his throat made no sound. The light moved ahead of him through the shabby house. He found what he was after in a dresser drawer—Nell's .32 Colt revolver.

It was fully loaded with nickel-jacketed bullets and freshly cleaned. Then, on the wooden bottom of the nearly empty drawer his probing light beam revealed a droplet of oil. On the pure glistening surface of the minute hemisphere floated something that sparkled. He had to put his eye close to detect that it was an almost microscopic metal filing.

Thursday sucked in his breath and examined the blue-steel gun more closely. Then he dropped it in his coat pocket and left the house.

Irene Benedict was sitting in the car, rocking Georgie gently. His eyes were closed but he gasped convulsively now and then. Irene's cheeks were wet. "She's dead, isn't she?" she whispered.

Thursday nodded and sank onto the seat beside her. "Kid asleep?"

"Yes."

He got out the revolver and turned it over and over in his hands. "She was shot three or four times with her own gun. Probably this afternoon and probably when the kid was playing somewhere. This is it—her own gun and the one that can be traced to her." His voice was a monotone. "But her own gun isn't the same one that put a bullet in my office wall—not any more. After Nell died, the killer did some reboring and scouring work inside the barrel, then cleaned it and put it away. The barrel markings are all different now. It can be done with a fine rattail file the right size."

Georgie shivered as though about to awake and Irene crooned to him.

Thursday said, "Ballistics will prove that this gun was not the one fired in my office. The gun that put the bullet in my wall and killed Colonel Fathom and killed Nell Kopke no longer exists. That mythical gun which I claimed as my own is the murder gun. Not this one in my hand. It's innocent because the barrel markings have been changed."

He put the revolver away in his pocket suddenly and gazed through the windshield at nothing, trying to think. But it all came down to the same provable fact, the kind Benedict worshipped.

"I claimed the gun that killed two people and it can't be proved otherwise." He said it aloud.

Irene understood none of it. She held Georgie close and said again, "Poor child."

NEXT ISSUE
MURDER IN BRIGHT LIGHTS
A Baffling Short Mystery Novel
AND MANY OTHER STORIES

CHAPTER XXX

SATURDAY, August 13, 10.00 p.m.——He had Irene stop by the roadside on the outskirts of San Ysidro. While border-bound traffic streamed past, Thursday printed a rough-lettered note which he pinned to Georgie's shirt front. The woman shook her head over the scrawny figure collapsed between them in sleep. "Oh, why must he ever wake up, Max? What he's been through is so horrible."

"He'll forget most of it. He's young enough."

"But what's going to happen to him?"

"Nothing good. The parents he had were on the fringes of the law, which is putting it nicely. Now they're both gone and he's an orphan. That means a state home. So he gets hit coming and going, heredity and environment." Thursday studied Irene's patrician profile hovering tenderly over the boy's mussed hair. "He's not a pretty kid, either. He won't appeal to adopters."

"He isn't ugly," she protested. "Little boys aren't supposed to be beautiful."

"That's easier to say when he's your own kid. But when you're shopping around you're particular. Adopters want them younger and cuter. No, Georgie'll grow up in a state home and with the breaks he's got he'll work his way through reform school right into a state prison."

"Oh, no!" She hugged the little body suddenly and Georgie whimpered in his sleep.

Thursday shrugged. "Maybe I'm getting morbid. I got state prisons on my mind tonight. Let's get on with what we got to do. After all, you can't take him back to the Benedict mansion."

She bit her lip and started the Buick up again. She followed his directions into the little town which fed off the border gates a mile south. Thursday had her stop in front of the county sheriff's substation. It was lighted but deserted. Through the steamy window of the short-order cafe next door he could see a bulky man in a visored cap at the counter. When the block was free of passers-by, Thursday scooped Georgie up and hurried into the substation. He left the sleeping boy on a bench inside the door and went back to the car. "Let's go."

"Will he be all right?" Irene asked, trying to get a last view of the youngster as they sped away.

"He's asleep and he's safe. I wish I could say the same."

"Where now, Max?"

"Coffee's place. North to Eighth Street in National City then take Highland over to Federal Boulevard."

It was ten-thirty when they pulled up within the bleak framework of the former filling station. Thursday got out and rattled the door and presently a light came. After a brief conversation he passed Nell Kopke's .32 through a broken pane and slipped back into the car. "Your house. I got a big idea but I don't know what to do with it."

They sped off again through the lowering canyon sides. "Why'd you give the gun to Mr. Coffee?" Irene asked.

"I told him to file it into dust or melt it or anything to destroy it for once and all. You see, this frame I wandered into depends a lot on Nell's gun being found and being proved a different gun from the one I claimed in my office. The killer counted on the police finding Nell's changed gun rather than me finding it. So now Nell's gun will never be found in either form. There's no gun to support my story about her shot at me but there's no gun to break my story, either. Which brings the odds up to fifty-fifty, anyway."

THEY rolled up the road between the avocado trees in nervous silence but the big house looked the same as when they had left. The district attorney had not yet come home. Inside,

Thursday hurried immediately to the radio in Benedict's study and tuned up the police calls. The search was county-wide now and tall thin men with arched noses were reported everywhere and being picked up everywhere.

"Quite a rat race," Thursday murmured. "Benedict's got his heart in this." He looked over at Irene in the doorway, her eyes hazily contemplating space. She hadn't bothered to take off her coat. "What are you thinking about?" he asked gently.

"Oh, several things. About Georgie and what you said. Max, I didn't realize you dwelt on subjects like that."

"Like what happens to other people?"

"I suppose so." She brought him into her gaze and drifted toward him. "You've really taught me a good many lessons. You're a pretty wonderful person to discover, you know—a sort of cavalier *manqué*."

"You bet," he said and snorted. Then he put his hands on her arms to stop her advance. She tossed her head so the scarf fell back off her neat blonde hair. She raised her serious face and her lips were parted, expecting his. He said, "Irene, we're all strung tight tonight and you especially are doing things you never did before. So don't let this chase feeling get you. Tomorrow you'll never believe it happened."

"Max—"

"Personally, I'm hungry. I hope your husband believes in food."

She twisted away and walked slowly to the door, bumping against a chair. "Thank you." A moment later she smiled wryly at him over her shoudlder. "I forgot my manners, didn't I? We can raid the icebox if you'd like."

"Icebox dates you, Irene—or so I'm told. Refrigerator is what—" He stopped, frowning, head cocked toward the radio.

"What is it?" Irene asked.

Thursday listened to more of the metallic voice before he reduced the volume. "Don Kerner. Sounds like some Boy Scouts on an overnight hike found him out in Rose Canyon. Bludgeoned not over an hour ago. That's so it'd match the pattern of the Papago death. Two bludgeonings, two shootings, and I'll inherit them all."

"Don Kerner. He's—"

"Yeah. Well, your husband won't be interested in sleep tonight, that's for sure." He urged her out the door. "How about some food?"

He called Quincy's apartment again. No one answered. He wandered out to the kitchen to watch Irene rummage through the refrigerator.

She asked, "Was that man important to you, Max?"

"Uh-huh. But I gave him up as soon as I heard he was out of jail. He undoubtedly knew what was coming, too, but he couldn't refuse bail without attracting attention and he was scared of his record. I didn't count on Quincy locating him but she did and—*what's that?*"

He leaped forward and clawed a bulky package out of the freezing compartment. It was wrapped in heavy buff-colored paper. His eyes accused the astonished Irene Benedict. "Where'd this come from?" He got the paper ripped open and inside was a small pot roast, frozen solid.

"Max—what are you doing?"

HE put the icy roast on the sink and held its thick wrapping up to the light. The watermark read: For Better Protection TITE. Comparison was unnecessary but he got the list out of his wallet, the list written on the kind of paper which had been lying around Rupert's office at Night & Day. The two papers were identical.

"Come on, Irene. Give. Where do they wrap meat this way?"

"It's only the usual paper. All my meat at the frozen food locker is wrapped in it. I took that roast out today for Sunday dinner. I don't—"

He was grinning broadly. "It's not usual to me. This shiny side is some sort of coated insulation. Do all the frozen food places use this?"

"I don't know. I've only been to the one here in La Mesa."

"Honey, I bet I know where your IOUs are, along with some dynamite that ought to change your husband's mind. Let's get back to that phone."

He raced down the hall to the study and dialed the *Sentinel* office, Merle Osborn's desk. She picked up her end after one ring. With only a terse explanation, he gave her instructions and hung up to wait. He couldn't sit still. He paced up and down, chewing his knuckles between cigarettes. Irene came in shortly with some bacon and tomato sandwiches and he stayed on his feet to eat them. She sat and watched him go back and forth. "Just one little bit of luck," he hoped aloud.

It was nearly half an hour before the phone jangled. Thursday let Irene answer and pass the receiver to him. Merle said, "Stinking news, Thursday."

"Don't say that. None at all?"

"Every one of the lockers is running to capacity since hot weather started. They've been booked up since April at least. No new rentals this week."

He swore softly but savagely. Then, "I been getting too clever. Are you up to calling all the managers again?"

Merle groaned. "I had to get two of them out of bed. They'll hate me."

"But I won't, Osborn."

"If I can count on that, it's a deal. What do you want to know this time?"

"This. Has anybody named Rupert or Day had a food locker all along?"

"That's nice and vague. I'll call you."

Thursday went back to pacing. The scrap of paper from Night & Day pointed definitely to the blackmail goods having been hidden in a frozen food locker somewhere in the county. But there were a number of locker plants and his time was short and his freedom of movement limited by every prowl car. Without specific information—

The more he thought it over the lower his spirits sank. When the telephone finally rang again at eleven-forty, he didn't even make a motion toward answering it. Irene said, holding it out to him, "It's the same woman."

"Hi, Osborn. What's the bad word?"

"You sound great. Are you sure you can stand glad tidings?"

"No fooling!" He gripped the receiver tightly. "Who and where?"

"Speaking of who, who is that woman answering your phone, might I ask?"

"A friend. Get to the word."

"Winter Weather Freezer in La Jolla, the last on my list, naturally. The manager's one of those with an early bedtime but he's been sweet about the whole thing. A Dartmouth man, he tells me. He invited me out to look at his icicles."

"You're not amusing me. What's the name and locker number?"

"You didn't tell me to get the locker number." He swore and Merle chuckled. "Being a bright little reporter, I got it anyway. Number 509. It's rented by Miss Quincy Day. Happy?"

He laughed with relief. "Now you see why I'm as smug as you say. I got friends like you. Osborn, I could kiss you."

"Talk's cheap," she said and hung up.

Thursday slammed the phone together and laughed again. He said to Irene's excited face, "Let's make that twenty mile trip to La Jolla. If this doesn't pay off, they keep a handy ocean there for guys who feel like jumping."

CHAPTER XXXI

SUNDAY, August 14, 12:15 a.m.——A little past midnight. Max Thursday stood on a sidewalk in La Jolla. Irene's car disappeared down Center Street, going back the way she'd come. Even the coast breeze seemed warm to him tonight as he hesitated before testing his luck. It was pleasant to stand still, doing nothing to prove himself wrong, and listen to the distant grumble of the Pa-

cific and the occasional spurting by of a car on the boulevard a block away.

The Winter Weather Freezer was out of the central commercial district of the rich seaside resort. In the dark its low-hanging roof and modern lines, with only a modest gold-letter sign, could be mistaken for just another large residence. It held aloof from the sidewalk behind a smooth lawn and beds of nodding flowers.

Thursday snapped out of his inaction and strolled once past the building, scrutinizing the broad plate glass windows, hunting the easiest means of entrance. Irene had suggested that he have the manager let him in, but he had said, "No." What he intended to do, rifle a locker, could only be interpreted as burglary no matter how worthy his purpose.

He reached the shadows behind the building and continued his search along a loading platform. The rear door was securely locked but next to it was a small window, unscreened. He ran his hand along the painted sill and a large sliver of wood pricked his thumb. Frowning, he pulled the fragment out and tried the lower half of the glass. The window slid up, rattling like an avalanche in his caution-tuned eardrums.

After a moment of straining silence, Thursday decided he wasn't going to hear anything else. He heaved his long body up and wriggled through the small opening. His blind hand groped over a work table edge and he braced himself on that before dropping to the concrete floor. He half-crouched there, motionless, alert to something he couldn't define. Then he realized a cold draft had eddied around his ankles for a moment and ceased. While trying to remember its direction, he heard a door close softly. Somewhere ahead in the dark.

He could hear the blood pump faster in his head. The already-open window —he had arrived here immediately behind somebody else.

Narrowing his eyes as if to will some semblance of form to the murky front part of the freezing plant, Thursday stole forward, groping for obstacles. Ahead of him faint moonlight filtered through the plate glass windows. His vision improved with each step and he saw he was in a long wide corridor lined with meat blocks and enamel-top tables and scales. He reached out toward the gleaming reflections of racked blades and selected a long pointed carving knife. He began his slow advance along the corridor again.

His toe connected with something and a metal basket skittered away across the concrete, flipping over. In the instant of quiet which followed, Thursday held himself rigid. Then there was a rush of light footsteps and the clash of bolts and the creak of a heavy door opening.

Thursday charged forward, leading with the knife. It was turned aside violently and his shoulder smashed into the massive hardwood door of the plant's refrigeration room. Icy air bathed his face. He caught the door before it closed completely and slipped into the absolute blackness of the huge meat box.

He eased the door to behind him without letting it latch. As he did so, a second heavy door clicked shut at the far end of the box. He moved toward the noise, his hands found the surface of the door, found the latch. He shoved. Unbelieving, he threw his weight against the smooth iron latch handle again. He dropped his knife and tried a third time.

The door was locked or jammed from the outside.

THURSDAY felt a sickening coldness that had nothing to do with the flood of bitter air churning down from above. He stumbled quickly back the way he'd come. The first door was now tight shut, too, and neither would its handle bulge under his pounding.

Then he began really to feel the cold. It wrapped him round like a blanket and penetrated deeper and deeper as if peeling off successive layers of his flesh.

And he couldn't see anything. It was worse because he couldn't see.

As if granting a wish, fluorescent lights overhead flickered and chattered and came to life. He spun around watchfully but he was alone in the box, alone in the twelve by eight room, its varnished planks flecked with sparkling snow. All about him sides of beef and lamb and pork and venison hung from wall hooks and a row of metal baskets held packages wrapped in the familiar buff-colored paper. But neither the slaughtered animals nor he had turned on the lights.

There was the door at one end he had entered and a door at the other which presumably led to the public locker room at the front of the plant. Otherwise—his eyes leaped to an opening midway along the wall, the size of a small picture frame. His panic-born hopes died immediately. The aperture was large enough for a good-sized cat to pass through, or a parcel of meat, but far too small an exit for even a small man.

His heart jumped again at the sound of a latch being raised. But the noise came from the parcel opening and Quincy Day's voice called, "Max?"

He got to one side of the opening and bent to peek through quickly. It was a wooden tunnel nearly as long as his arm and he figured it would logically open into the preparation corridor. He hadn't seen anything at the other end. Quincy's husky voice said again, "Max?"

"Oh, I'm here," Thursday said. "Satisfied?"

"You shouldn't have come."

"Skip it. Now, are you going to use your head and unlock one of those doors?"

She paused. "I don't know."

"I wasn't asking you, Quincy. You couldn't have worked that door stunt alone. I was asking your boss, the Night of Night & Day. How about it, Vespasian?"

Joaquin Vespasian's staccato laugh came in from the outer darkness. "Say, I think you just answered your own question, Maxie."

"You're missing some angles, you know that. The cops are on their way here right now. Let me out before they catch me here and maybe we can make a deal."

"You're lousy at lying. You got nothing to deal with. Nothing big enough. Maybe if you hadn't been so chintzy back when you thought I was a small-time grifter—boy, were you big and tough, then!"

"Okay. This place still opens at eight o'clock, Sundays included."

"So you'll still be here. Maxie, old friend, the temperature in that box is some twenty below zero. A beef carcass freezes solid in an hour or so. So you'll walk around for maybe two hours before you get sleepy. And that's that."

Thursday didn't answer at once, waiting to make certain his voice would come out sounding normal. "Quincy," he called. "Two other people know I came here tonight to look through your food locker. You leave me here and you're tied to me forever."

"Max, I don't want to leave you, of course," Quincy said. "But Joaquin is absolutely right. We must think of ourselves."

"Sure, but think of your own self first. If you still have the key to your locker, hang on to it. Vespasian's always kept himself out of things, you notice. You're the next one being rigged, sweetheart."

Vespasian swore scoffingly with a voice that strutted.

THURSDAY grimaced painfully, trying to think of a wedge. Unless he could beat them with talk . . . He jammed his hands in his pockets and chased the *unless* out of his mind. Through the pockets his palms felt the chilled skin of his thighs. He thrust again at the pair outside with, "Quincy, you're still pretty much in the clear. They can nail your boy friend with two of the four killings but you don't actually face a murder rap—yet."

A moment of silence from the other end of the little tunnel. Then Quincy whispered something and Vespasian answered sharply, "Don't let him kid you, Quincy." He raised his voice to Thursday, "She's been in half of everything since I set up Night & Day for her in '44. She's been front and I been brains."

"It sure looks it," Thursday said. "When Rupert, her doctor stooge, got out of prison he slid into a nice clean job across the room from her. But you stayed in that ratty plaster shack, telling fortunes. That's brains, huh?"

"You know how the cops pick off big guys. They see they got more flash than the day before when they were little guys. So I stayed safe as a little guy where I could move around more. Besides, any time I wanted I could relax, enjoy the good things I earned."

"You mean Quincy," Thursday said.

HE shivered and his cheek brushed the cold skinned corpse of a lamb. He began talking again, afraid to let the conversation lag. They might go away. They might turn off the lights. "So that shaving gear in her apartment belonged to you and not to Rupert like she let me think. I guess you were up there with her the night Fathom got cute and killed Papago."

"Fathom." Vespasian sounded as if he'd just spit. "He had rocks for brains. Papago could have been bought off or fenced in. Killing him was dumb."

"You bet it was. That's what probably kept you in business so long, steering clear of downright murder. You weren't cut out for it. You'd rather scheme around things. Like that first night when you planted the hat in my car and Papago's body among the alligators. Fear tactics—you're good at that."

"I like to use what's lying around," Vespasian said. "I got right next to you after you rang me in with that hat. You had me worried for a few hours there until I found out you were just chasing anybody connected with the Greek. And you had me worried tonight when I heard you had broken loose from the D. A. I called your office, thought we might get together on that phony deal we were always going to make. I didn't want you staying loose, I got to admit. Never know what you might do next. Up to now."

Thursday managed a sort of laugh. "What if I'd tabbed you earlier? I might have hitched you to the shakedown business just because of your taste in women. You went for Rosa Lalli and Nell Kopke, both big women. What if I'd figured a little squirt like you might be next to Quincy who's also on the large side?"

"But you shouldn't have stayed alive past Wednesday, Maxie. *I* sent Nell up to see you at your office. She depended on me quite a bit and after her loverboy got his she was open to suggestions for revenge. I suggested you in a roundabout way but her shooting wasn't all she claimed it was."

"Yeah, and you believing her bragging put you in the hospital."

"I thought that had the makings of a pretty fair setup myself. There was Nell's bullet in your office wall, with a good chance it could be dug out and identified. And here was Colonel Fathom, making noises like he was somebody important. If I could talk Nell into shooting Fathom with a gun you had said was yours—see? Setup. I even changed Nell's bullets from lead ones to nickel-jackets. Nickel slugs get marked up less by the gun barrel but if they hit a bone, there's less chance of them getting mashed useless for identification. And, Maxie, it paid off."

Thursday found he was shivering violently now. He began to stamp his feet and move his shoulders back and forth, trying to warm as many muscles as possible without leaving the speaking tube. "Only trouble was the way it worked out. You didn't mind me being with Fathom in the line of fire. But I made you sit in the front seat with the target and Nell did her usual blind shooting.

Fathom was putting on a scared act before that, wasn't he? You told him it was a trap for me, didn't you?"

Quincy's voice cut in, "You didn't say that, did you, Joaquin?"

"Sure he did, Quincy. Are you sure of his plans for you, by the way? I bet he's even started carrying a gun now. He's killed two people tonight and it's easy to get the habit."

Vespasian snapped at her, "Fathom doesn't matter. Forget him."

"Nell Kopke trusted you for a while and now she doesn't matter," Thursday insisted silkily. "You laid out a nice train alibi for her, Vespasian. Why didn't she leave town the second time? Why'd she stick around and get mad at you?"

"The bottle was getting her, Maxie. Nothing she wanted more than to get the guy who got Papago—until after she'd done it. Then she couldn't stand the idea of having killed somebody and started blaming me. What you call a guilt complex."

"And you finally had to do a killing personally. I was down to San Ysidro earlier tonight, Vespasian. Up till I found that rebored .32 I'd thought the frame for Fathom's murder was only unlucky coincidences. But Nell's revolver made me see different. It made me see that her bullet in my wall wasn't exactly discovered by the D. A.'s man. It was pointed out to him by Yvonne Odler. It made me see that the brains behind such a frame had to be Nell or somebody she talked to. And you were the guy she generally let her hair down for."

Vespasian didn't seem to be listening any longer. Thursday could hear him murmuring to the woman, something about "leaving" and "key."

Thursday said, "Quincy! What about it?"

Again she hesitated. "Max, I hate to. But I must."

The little man asked through the opening, "You want the lights left on or off?"

THURSDAY fought back the fear that wanted to smother his voice. "Vespasian, you better listen to a few details—even if your girl friend won't. You're not the only schemer in your outfit. Quincy has had a few ideas, too. Like moving all the goods out here without telling you about it."

"What makes you think she didn't tell me?" Vespasian asked edgily.

"Remember when I sent you up to break into Night & Day? You figured Don Kerner had already named some names to me and it wouldn't do much harm to bring me back your actual sucker list. That'd also make you look good to me for a little longer while you spun the rest of your web. But you picked up that scrap of frozen food paper in Rupert's office where he'd wrapped up the goods for transfer. No, you'd never have written the list on that particular piece of paper if you'd known what Quincy had done. And she didn't tell you about the move very long ago either, or you wouldn't have waited until this late hour to get the stuff out."

"Doesn't hold water, Maxie. I was in the hospital, out of commission. Quincy did what she thought best."

"Certainly," the woman's voice chimed in quickly. "I'm glad you understand that. Joaquin."

"Do you understand why she sent Rupert up to blast you with that shotgun, Vespasian?"

Silence began and blossomed. Quincy's tense voice killed it. "Don't listen to him, Joaquin. You know he's merely bluffing, attempting to save himself. You know it was Kerner."

Thursday laughed, trying to sound scornfully confident. His jaw ached from keeping his teeth from chattering. "That Kerner story's a hot one. Get this, Vespasian. Don Kerner was in jail up till this morning. I know because I parked him there personally. He couldn't have put that buckshot in you. But Rupert could and would and did. You think he likes your guts because you've got Quincy and he hasn't any more?"

Then he heard Vespasian whisper, "Quincy—let me see your face."

"Clever girl." Thursday kept stabbing at them. "She's cut the corners pretty fine but she thought of every possibility. As soon as the radio news told her you'd gone to the hospital, Vespasian, she called me up for a breakfast date. She buttered me up, entertained me that whole next day. She wanted the protection of my big strong arms in case I ended up with all the cards. Meanwhile, she had your blackmail property moved to make sure I wouldn't get hold of that. And the same day she tried to get you polished off so she could have the whole works. Then when she found Kerner was in jail she had Rupert spring him just so you'd have a goat for that shotgun blast."

"No," Quincy said. "He's lying. Obviously."

"Obviously," Vespasian said. "On the other hand, you always brag about that time in Cleveland when you let Rupert take your tumble. Turn on your flashlight, Quincy. I want to see your face when you tell me."

"You see, Vespasian, you really didn't have to crack Kerner's skull for him. He didn't want anything but out. He'd never—"

"Quincy—let's have that light!"

"Get away from me," her voice went up shrilly. "Get away from me! Don't ever forget you're not the only one with a gun!"

"I got to know that he's lying, don't I?"

"Joaquin, if you don't trust me—I warn you—"

"The light, Quincy girl. And give me the locker key. If you don't get a move on, I'm going to come and—"

A shot thundered through the building. Thursday flattened against the meat box wall, keeping away from the opening. He heard another shot, another and then four more strung together like firecrackers. Glass fell musically, an overture to the silence.

Then his ears caught the soft bump as somebody sank to the corridor floor outside. "Vespasian!" he called. "Quincy!"

Neither answered and he called again. After a moment, he heard footsteps move slowly away toward the front of the plant. He heard the feet crunch through glass and then there was no more sound. The door to the parcel tunnel drifted to and his outstretched arm couldn't catch it before it clicked shut.

Thursday began walking swiftly back and forth, flailing his arms. Overhead, the vents hissed biting wind down on him. He lit a cigarette to warm his stiff hands a little but the suck of smoke pained his throat. He stomped it out.

On the other side of the wall, in the preparation corridor, someone lay. Quincy or Vespasian? Dead or alive? He scrubbed his hands together and could barely feel the contact. Seven shots. Had any of them been heard? He said aloud, "Not much point in me making them fight if nobody's going to hear the noise." He didn't like the sound of his own voice.

He thought things, instead. He thought, pretty proud of yourself, aren't you? And, somebody's bound to let you out before long.

Thursday stamped around helplessly, looking at the frozen meat on the hooks and wondering.

CHAPTER XXXII

SUNDAY, August 14, 2:00 a.m.——Austin Clapp stepped through the broken front window of the Winter Weather Freezer and crossed the lawn to where a police interne was walking Thursday up and down. "How you feeling now, Max?"

Thursday still shivered spasmodically, even beneath the two ponderous army blankets clutched around his body. He still couldn't feel the soles of his feet or

his fingertips. His lungs ached from nearly an hour of the sub-zero air and he sneezed and they ached worse. He muttered, "I'm dying."

Clapp grinned sympathetically. "Maybe next time you'll think it over before you take on a gang single-handed, bright boy. Maybe you'll remember the pasting you took for nothing."

Thursday snorted. "Go on. Pull the old one about going into a battle of wits half-armed."

The homicide chief fell into step with Thursday and the interne as they paraded up and down the sidewalk, past the parked prowl cars and motorcycles. The ambulance had pulled in by the rear loading platform. Slippered, robed and staring neighbors had come out of the Center Street houses to guess what was going on. Clapp sighed. "The story I got from the victim inside clears you of the murder charge pretty well. All that's left against you are a few felonies."

"A half hour ago I didn't care."

"You better start caring. And thinking. I talked to Benedict on the radio. Because of this handful of new business, he says to let you stay free on recognizance for a while. He's going to attend to you later."

Thursday frowned. "I think he's got a better reason than what he laughingly calls my recognizance."

"What?"

Thursday didn't answer. He said, "Poor Benedict. He worked so hard for my execution, too." They grinned at each other.

Clapp said, "Even funnier than Benedict is you getting caught among the ice cubes tonight."

"I told you. I got in touch with Vespasian and he said meet him on this corner. Why this particular corner I'll never know. Then he pulled up with Quincy Day in her car and took a potshot at me. It broke that window and since I didn't have a gun I dove inside and hid in the icebox. They couldn't get in to me so they fixed it that I wouldn't get out. Then Quincy and Vespasian had a fight and—"

"Sure, sure. It still makes you look pretty silly. And if a prowl car hadn't happened to investigate that broken window, you'd still be in there." Clapp glanced over Thursday's shrouded figure. "Feel like going back inside now?"

"Am I wanted?"

"Uh-huh. Doc Stein says you better hurry."

Thursday shook out of the two blankets and gave them to the interne. With Clapp, he returned to the locker plant through the big smashed window. They pushed through the milling uniforms and plain-clothes men and ambulance men into the brilliantly lighted preparation corridor. Police cameras were flashing. Stein was at the telephone.

THE stretcher lay along an enamel-top wrapping table, a scale at its head. Thursday leaned over the woman and touched her clenched fists. Quincy Day opened her slant eyes and smiled up weakly. The lipstick was chewed from her mouth. She whispered, "I'm so glad you came back, darling."

"How you feeling, Quincy?"

"Fine. They gave me something. How are you, Max?"

"Don't worry about me. I'm okay."

"I'm so glad. I didn't want to leave you in there. You know I didn't want to, don't you?"

"Sure, I know you didn't."

"I would have come back to let you out. I had planned— You do believe me, Max?"

"I believe you, honey."

"Darling. That's good." Her eyes drifted shut and the only darkness on her chalky white face was in her winged eyebrows.

"Quincy?"

Stein tapped Thursday's shoulder and drew him a step away. He said, low-voiced, "We're taking her down the road to Scripps Hospital. I'm afraid it's a waste of time but we got to try."

"Bad off?"

"Three times through the abdomen, close up. She'd lost a lot of blood by the time I got here and the hemorrhage—there's no way to stop it in time."

"Stein," said Thursday, "do you mind if I ride to the hospital with her?"

"Why should I? Put the internes up front if you like." He motioned to the ambulance crew.

When they lifted the stretcher, Quincy spread her eyes wide, frightened. "Max!" she called. "Where are you?"

"Right here, Quincy." He walked along with one hand on the stretcher as they carried it through the building, across the loading platform and into the black police ambulance.

"This is no time to leave," she whispered. When he crouched beside her and the doors shut them in alone, she twisted her mouth into a colorless grin. "So much left unsaid and now I can hardly talk at all." The pallor gave her a girlish look; there was no longer anything of the witch about her. Her two fists lay tightly gripped on her breast, outside the blanket.

He clumsily smoothed the hair off her forehead. He felt the ambulance turn around and creep along the driveway to the street. Quincy was watching his face. "Max."

"Right beside you, honey."

"I really think I'm through now. Isn't that so?"

He lied. "No. The doc says you'll come out all right. It's better if you just relax."

She tried to raise her head and couldn't. "Max—you did care, didn't you? That's what counts, your caring quite a bit. You wouldn't have sent me to prison if you could possibly have saved me, would you? You'd have thought of something, I meant so much to you."

His pause was hardly noticeable before he lied again. "That's right, honey. I would have let you get away."

Quincy smiled, satisfied, and let her head loll to one side. Thursday took up one clenched fist and gently opened the curled fingers. He spread the hand out on the blanket and lifted the other fist. Quincy rolled her head back to him again. Her violet eyes fluttered open, shut, then open. He could barely hear her say, "You may have the key, darling."

She opened her fingers and the locker key slid out on the blanket. It lay glinting silvery for a moment before Thursday picked it up. Quincy still smiled up at him, her exotic eyes unblinking.

When they reached the receiving entrance of Scripps Hospital, Thursday was still crouched beside her, holding a hand that seemed as cold as his own.

CHAPTER XXXIII

SUNDAY, August 14 and Monday, August 15——For the next two days, Max Thursday remained at large and busy. Every time he sneezed, he thought of Benedict. He was expecting re-arrest momentarily but it didn't come. He knew why Benedict was holding off—and it wasn't because Thursday had relinquished credit for the Night & Day case.

The *Sentinel* extra, Sunday morning, gave over the entire front page to Merle Osborn's flamboyant story of "the fall of the blackmail empire." The *Sentinel* editors knew a beat when it fell in their laps—and they owned one in Merle's pictures, the complete set she had taken of Night & Day personnel and interiors following the pretended robbery.

So that edition was only the first of three extras erupted by the *Sentinel* presses during those two days, setting a record for even that paper's gaudy career. The second, hawked through a baking Sunday afternoon, was about Rupert. The third, at breakfast time Monday, was about Vespasian.

Rupert, formerly Dr. Theodore Newman of Cleveland, shot himself in a room of the Liberty Hotel after hearing the first radio report of Quincy's death. He

left a rambling note which blamed Vespasian for the murders of Papago, Fathom, Kerner and Nell Kopke. He did his best to absolve Quincy of all guilt.

His room was cluttered with pictures of the slant-eyed woman and souvenirs —dozens of handkerchiefs, the single letter she had written him in prison, old theater programs and even a compact with a broken mirror. Rupert, using his left hand because of a broken trigger finger on his right, fumbled the first attempt but reached his heart with the second.

Joaquin Vespasian had nearly reached Albuquerque by dawn Monday. He was buying gasoline at a combination filling station and roadside cafe when a young deputy sheriff finished his coffee and stepped outside. Vespasian, feverish and bleary-eyed, reacted to the sight of the uniform by drawing his gun. His fusillade went wild but the deputy's reply didn't. The autopsy revealed that, in addition to the bullet which killed him, Vespasian's small body also held four slugs from Quincy's automatic and several pellets from Rupert's attempted assassination. And his earlier wounds from Nell Kopke's revolver were festering with infection.

"Beats me how he got so far," Clapp told Thursday on the telephone Monday noon. "But that winds up the homicide end. I'm satisfied even if Benedict isn't."

"Was he ever?"

"He's tearing his remaining hair over the blackmail stuff. They had to have a file somewhere but he can't find it. Last night he impounded that whole freezer out in La Jolla and spent most of the night opening packages of meat. Quincy Day had a locker there, all right, but it was empty."

"If I were the vindictive type I'd wish him as bad a cold as I got."

"I've heard you in better voice. It getting you down?"

"I chiseled Stein out of some city penicillin. He's got a crazy idea I'll live."

"You better. Benedict wants to see you this afternoon." Clapp paused. "However, it's not an order, Max. Just an invitation. Want to go?"

"Pick me up about four. I'll be tied up till then."

Thursday had spent all Monday morning and would spend most of the afternoon delivering Night & Day's extortion material and Kerner's photostatic copies to the rightful owners. In each case, he insisted that they destroy the evidence in his presence.

He had made his only exception of Irene Whitney Benedict. He had destroyed the ten IOUs himself after Merle Osborn, using Quincy's key, opened the locker Sunday morning. He had immediately phoned a terse message to Irene and received a brief thank-you.

NOW, after Clapp hung up, he extracted a flat little package from among the morning mail on his desk. The La Mesa postmark had caught his eye and he knew it was from Irene. Thursday cut open the paper, cleared the ribbon out of his way and sat grinning down at the open gift box. He examined the contents. There were fifteen ten dollar bills, the balance of his fee for six days. There was no message but the money was inserted in the leather wallet she had been making for her husband. It was finished.

Shortly after four, he and Clapp were ushered by Ed Wales into the district attorney's office. Wales gave Thursday an especially friendly smile and then left the visitors alone with Benedict.

Benedict didn't smile. His long face stayed neutral, gazing across the desk as if Thursday's chair were still empty. "It is in some part through your efforts, Thursday, that we have destroyed a vicious organization. Although some aspects of the case don't satisfy this office, a broad sort of justice seems to have been done."

"Nothing ever turns out quite the way you expect," Thursday murmured. He put a coughdrop in his mouth. "By the way, I understand congratulations are in

order for you." Benedict raised his eyebrows. "I read this morning about you starting adoption proceedings on Georgie Papago."

"That's a fine thing, Benedict," Clapp rumbled.

"Yes." But the district attorney didn't seem completely pleased as his eyes dropped to Irene's picture "Thank you for your congratulations, but in all honesty I must tell you it was my wife who insisted that the youngster deserved this opportunity. I'll pass your words along to her"

Benedict appraised Thursday again. "However . . . perhaps Lieutenant Clapp has told you that the material used for extortion by the Night & Day group has not been found."

"Probably Vespasian destroyed it when you started to close in. Anyway, if it's gone it's not going to hurt anybody."

"If it is gone. In view of your methods, I was hoping you could shed some light on the situation."

Thursday sucked on his coughdrop. "Come out and say it."

"I dislike to make a direct accusation, Thursday, so I'll put it as a question. Are you for any reason hiding this evidence?"

Thursday looked at Clapp. "Your idea of a friendly call?" Clapp shrugged and kept his mouth shut. Thursday said, "Benedict, if you feel like making an official charge I'll be glad to hand you an official answer. Until then, you can think what you like."

"Perhaps you've forgotten how many charges are pending against you already Escape from detention, assault upon a duly empowered—"

"I haven't forgotten."

Benedict stood up slowly. "Then you may guess how strongly I'm tempted."

Thursday rose at the same time. He chewed up his coughdrop, swallowed the fragments and said, "Look. I know exactly why you haven't thrown the book

[*Turn page*]

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Do We Have To Die?

Thirty-nine years ago in forbidden Tibet, behind the highest mountains in the world, a young Englishman named Edwin J. Dingle found the answer to this question. A great mystic opened his eyes. A great change came over him. He realized the strange power that knowledge gives.

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As a first step in their progress toward the Power that Knowledge gives, Mr. Dingle wants to send to readers of this paper a 9,000-word treatise. He says the time is here for it to be released to the Western World, and offers to send it, free of cost or obligation, to sincere readers of this notice. For your free copy, address The Institute of Mentalphysics, 213 South Hobart Blvd., Dept. L-462, Los Angeles 4, Calif. Readers are urged to write promptly as only a limited number of the free books have been printed.

at me. You can't find the Night & Day stuff and you're afraid I've got it. You're afraid my going to jail might send that dirty linen straight to a laundry called the *Sentinel*."

Clapp said, "I'm not present," and ambled to the door. He asked Benedict, "Is he free to go or isn't he?" When neither man answered him, he went on out.

The other two fought it out with their eyes, estimating, judging. Thursday spoke first. "What I said. That's it, isn't it?"

Then he waited. His freedom, his license depended on Benedict. On how stubborn the man was. On—Thursday didn't like the thought—whether such a man, devoted to honesty, could be bribed.

Finally, Benedict said coldly, "That's it precisely, a matter of balance." His face was stiff. "I can forego punishing you, Thursday, only because that action might harm far more valuable members of the community. You see, I've estimated your character correctly." He nodded dismissal and sat down to work among the papers on his desk.

"You're a lousy gambler, Benedict. I might be bluffing."

"No. I know you."

As Thursday reached the door, Benedict added, "But where we're leaving this matter extends only to this instant. Never forget that. I owe you nothing whatsoever."

"Sure. We'll start from scratch."

Thursday blew out his breath as he joined Clapp on the sunny courthouse steps. Clapp said, "Well, you got away with it all around, Max. Complete victory."

"I wouldn't say complete," Thursday murmured. "You called it right. There's a taste in my mouth."

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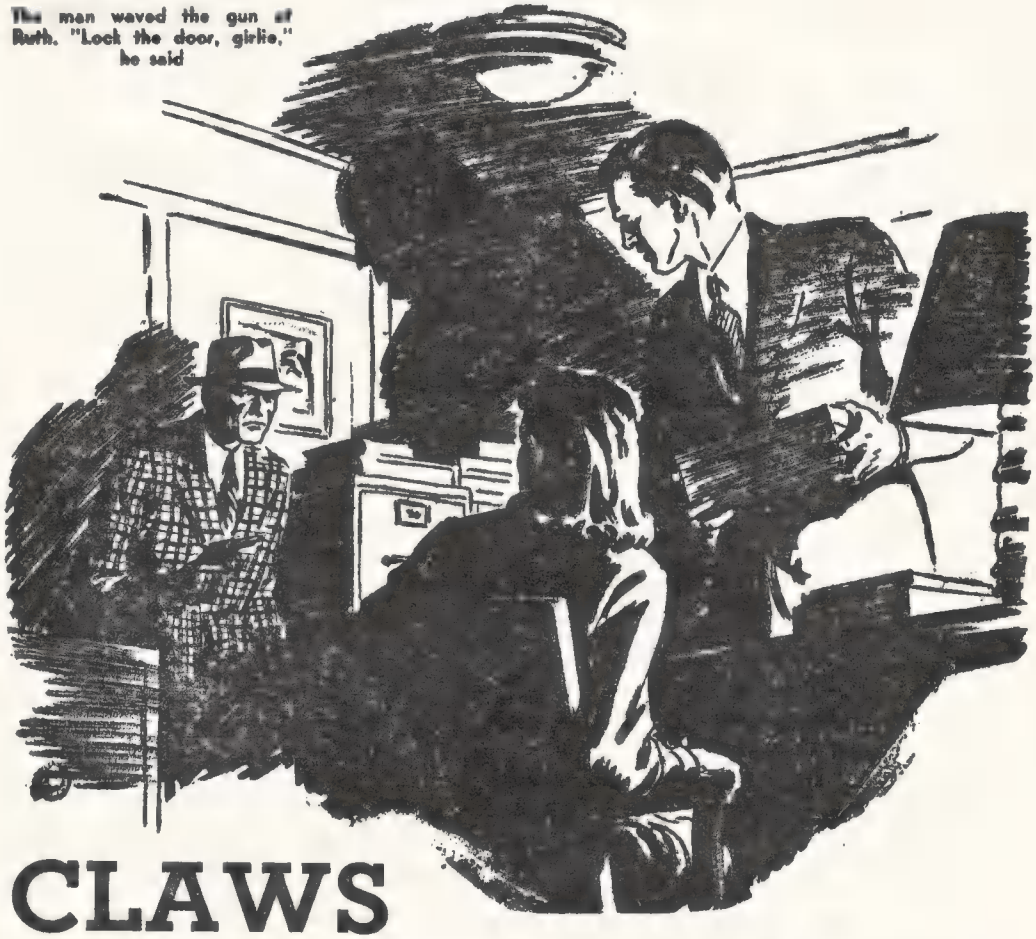

The man waved the gun at Ruth. "Lock the door, girlie," he said

CLAWS for the PEACOCK

By B. J. BENSON

THE young man was driving along the reservoir parkway the way he always did on his way home from work. It was eleven-thirty at night and there were scattered clusters of parked cars facing the shimmering silver of the water. Although he was looking at the beady red eyes of their tail lights his mind was on other matters.

He had gone home at his usual time, worried in his usual way about the attendance at his theater. He hadn't been

Managing a theater is one thing, but you've got to know how to act when you're a witness to a murder!

the Rialto's assistant manager very long. Six months. It was only a temporary promotion and that's why the little things bothered him; the things that made up most of his job.

There was a ripped seat that had to be repaired. There was that unclaimed briefcase from the checkroom; that, and the receipts he had put away tonight in the old office safe. The receipts had always made him nervous and sometimes he'd go back because he thought he had forgotten to twirl the knob afterward. But each time the knob had always been turned and the safe locked, and each time he'd feel a little foolish about it.

He turned off the parkway and headed for the West Side a mile away. The connecting link was the tortuous, twisted, deserted Mile Road, a place gloomy and eerie at night, with large overhanging trees that reached out and scraped the sides of the cars.

Nobody ever stopped there. That's what surprised him when he saw the car. He made the sharp horseshoe turn and came suddenly on the parked car ten yards away. It happened so fast that he couldn't remember the sequence exactly.

First he thought it was the four flashes jabbing out to the figures on the front seat of the car and then the four staccato reports in the night air. His headlights caught the figure of the man standing at the open door of the parked sedan with the gun in his gloved hand.

The man was dark, or so it seemed in the light. His hat was pulled well down but he could see the tallness of him, the stooping shoulders and the jutted jaw of his face. Then the man turned his head into the lights and he saw the high cheekbones and even the wrinkles around the eyes.

Automatically, his foot had gone down hard on the brake and the tires were screeching on the macadam. When the gun lifted toward him his reflexes worked faster than his brain. His foot came off the brake and onto the gas and the car bucked and bounded forward. The front windshield glass splintered near him and then he heard the shot. He felt his throat tighten and his stomach knot up and he almost missed the sharp curve in front of him. The second shot pinged in, behind him, into the body of the car. His coupe picked up speed and he looked into the rear view mirror and saw the blackness behind him.

There was no pursuit. Now he felt the tingling on his face and his hand came up and his fingers touched the slivers of glass and the wetness of blood.

He didn't slow down until he saw the light of the Seventh Precinct Police Station on Bay State Avenue. Then he was out of the car and up the wide concrete stairs. The desk patrolman called the night lieutenant and they listened to him with unblinking eyes. Behind them, at a switchboard, a man spoke sharply and concisely into a microphone.

HE had to wait for a man from Central Homicide, a detective sergeant named Cunningham. In the meantime they had asked him the questions.

"Name?"

"Walter Peacock."

"Age?"

"Twenty six."

"Home address?"

"342 Belknap Street."

"How long?"

"Two years."

"Occupation?"

"Assistant manager, Rialto Theater."

"How long?"

"Six months as assistant manager. Two years on the G.I. bill of training."

"Married?"

"No."

"Family?"

"Sister in San Francisco. Mrs. Henry R. James."

"Nobody else?"

"Nobody. Nobody except Ruth."

"Ruth? Ruth who?"

"Ruth Johnson. My fiancee."

"Her address?"

"889 Hampshire Boulevard."

Then he had to tell the whole thing over again.

He was sitting on the hard wooden bench in the ready room, smoking one cigarette after another. He kept looking at his watch because the hands didn't seem to move. But only fifteen minutes had gone by when Sergeant Cunningham came in. He was light-haired and tall and his face had that deceptive softness that sometimes went with blond people. There was a metallic hardness in his voice. He could have been anywhere between thirty and forty.

They left the station in a black Headquarters car with a Detective Rosen at the wheel. When they came to the Mile Road there was a shut off there and a blue uniformed cop left the side of his cruiser and peered in the window. Another cop came over. There was a salute and the barrier was pulled aside.

When they got there he saw the three white police cars and a police ambulance. The spotlights from the placed cars lit the scene like a night baseball game. He was pushed through the civilian clothes and blue uniforms with Cunningham stopping to shake hands with several people.

The bodies were sprawled across the front seat which was covered with what looked like black oil blotches. Nearest to him, at the right hand open door, was the girl. Her head was slumped over and her long blond, pageboy bob had fallen away to expose her neck. Her face was away from him but he kept staring at the hole in the back of the neck, just below the hairline. One arm lay stiff across the back of the seat and the other still clutched a small gray purse.

The man was resting over the wheel, the top of his head a bloody mass. Blood had run down over his white collar and tan gabardine suit. Peacock could see the girl's face now and the distortion and unspeakable horror in it made him weak. Turning away he fled to the side of the road.

Detective Rosen came over and offered him a cigarette.

"I've been in this business some time," Rosen said softly, "but I never got used to it, either."

"I want to get out of here," Peacock said. "I want to go home."

He looked over to the sedan and saw the flashlight bulbs go off. A man was measuring the ground with a steel tape and another was dusting gray powder at the door. He turned away again as they lifted the bodies out and laid them on stretchers on the ground. A man with a black bag came over and started to examine the bodies.

Peacock looked up and saw Sergeant Cunningham. His hat was tilted back over his head and an unlit, stubby briar pipe was in his mouth.

"They look familiar to you?" Cunningham asked.

"No," he said. "I'd like to go home."

"Take it easy, kid," Cunningham said. He sucked on the dry pipe for a moment. "By the way, you don't happen to carry a gun?"

"Look," he said. He felt himself grow angry inside. "If you think—"

"Just asking," Cunningham said. "That's my job; you have to ask the questions. Well, the man's name is Charles E. Baird, Hotel Northern. Age: forty-three. The girl is Miss Candy Lamont, 202 Cypress Road. Age: twenty-two. At least that's what their drivers' licenses say. The man's wallet was in his coat pocket. There isn't a nickel in it. But sometimes, in a case like this, there are coincidences."

"What coincidence?"

"There were ticket stubs from the Rialto Theater in his pocket. The stubs are fresh. They could have been used tonight." He took out a pencil flashlight that was clipped to his breast pocket. From his outside coat pocket he took out the double-joined stubs. He stwitched on the thin stream of light and ran it over the half tickets.

"The numbers are 010817 and 010816," Cunningham said. "You can tell me when they were used if you'll check your numbers."

"I can tell you now," he said. "They were used tonight."

"You see what I mean by coincidences, Peacock?"

"The Rialto has twelve-hundred seats," he said. "Even on Monday."

"Just making conversation," Cunningham said sadly. "I'd like you to go back to Headquarters with me. I'll want the description of that guy again. Then there are pictures to look at. A lot of pictures. . . ."

IT was four A. M. now and he had been in bed about ten minutes. As he lay there staring at the window-latticed patch of light on the ceiling he thought he'd never be able to sleep again. Down at Headquarters he had looked at pictures, hundreds of them. And as his eyes had become blurred with the monotony of it they had given him black coffee, and then more coffee. They had fingerprinted him. Just in case, they said. He had gone over the description again. They were more insistent now, more exacting. A weave in the suit. Perhaps a scar. A mole. Shoes. But he couldn't remember more than he had seen. He had asked for his car. It was in the police garage. Ballistic tests, they said.

So they had brought him home to the boarding house. They had whisked him away through a back entrance. No newspapers, no publicity. He mustn't tell anyone. He was the positive identification—the eyewitness. He was their ace in the hole, Cunningham said.

His eyes wandered off the ceiling. He turned on his side and punched the pillow. Suddenly he was asleep.

When he got on the bus at one thirty in the afternoon he had the *Times-Journal* in his hands. The murders had a full spread on the front page complete with pictures of the victims. The girl had a common prettiness in a stilted five- and ten-cent store photograph. The man's face was flabby with a small mustache and squinting eyes. There was nothing much else in there that he didn't know. They had been living together at a downtown hotel as husband and wife. Police were checking. . . . There was no mention of any witnesses.

He put the paper down on his lap, turned his head. Across the aisle he saw the short chunky man who had boarded the bus with him. The man eyed him and then turned his head to look out of the window. When Peacock got off the bus downtown, he left the paper on the seat beside him. He crossed the street and went into Police Headquarters.

The Homicide office was a square room with a frosted glass door. There were three old-fashioned rolltop desks, a few chairs, a green steel filing cabinet and a bulletin board. Cunningham was sitting at a desk near the window. He got up and shook hands.

"Sorry I had to call you in again, Peacock. Have a seat. I won't keep you long if I can help it."

He sat down again, lit his pipe.

"There was another car there last night," Cunningham said. His voice was tired. "It was in a clump of trees about twenty yards away. You didn't see it?"

"No."

"You're sure?"

"I didn't see it."

Cunningham puffed for a moment. "Anyway, there were fresh tire tracks and we have a moulage. We have something else. The man wasn't Charles E. Baird. The girl wasn't Candy Lamont."

"But last night you said—"

"That was last night. The guy's real name is Richard Dacey. We've had a Federal reader on him for some time. He's from Ohio. Used to be an automobile dealer. Played hell with the black market before the OPA went off. After the war he was exporting new cars to South America. There were some complaints and the automobile company investigated. They found he had padded a lot of phoney local sales and they took his franchise away. When the Federal boys dropped in to see him about taxes and other things, Dacey was gone. That was two years ago."

"So he came here?"

"Yes. We can check him back two years. No visible means of income. Maintained a good hotel suite. He picked a good spot, a city of two hundred and fifty thousand. Big enough to submerge in, not big enough for large Federal agencies whose men had his picture in their pockets."

"What about the girl?"

"The girl? Just a girl," Cunningham said. "How many are there like her? Thousands. Thousands of girls with slicked-up names like Kathy or Vicki or Candy. Her real name was Catherine Lorgan. Occupation? Machine operator in a paper box factory. She had some money saved from a vacation club. She was sick of factory work and rooming houses. She had a good figure and she was young and easy to look at. She wanted to get into the big time.

"In she goes to a reconditioning salon and out she comes with tinted hair, arched eyebrows, and a sway in her walk. She buys one good cocktail gown and her name is now Candy Lamont. She goes to the Hotel Northern and sits at the bar. There she meets somebody else with a phoney name, Charles E. Baird. She's made the transformation, she's in the big time. And now? Now she's on a slab in the morgue."

"That still doesn't explain the killings."

"No. It doesn't," Cunningham said. He got up and went over to the window, standing in the bright sunlight. "It looks like a routine stick-up; then it doesn't. It's not always easy to put your finger right on it. It's like a game of solitaire. You keep turning the deck over until you find the card that fits."

"You mean a hold-up doesn't fit?"

"It goes off in tangents. Dacey was in Ohio. He wasn't in the export business alone. He needed somebody to ship the cars to South America. That meant the gulf ports. Maybe he had a man down there who wasn't paid off. Maybe he finally caught up with Dacey here. It's hard to tell yet."

"What else?"

"Oh, a few technical things," Cunningham said. "The girl didn't die right away, she bled to death. Her purse had been gone through but the few bucks she had weren't taken. The gun used was a .38 revolver so there were no ejected shells. The bullets check with the ones in your car and we have some markings on them from the gun barrel. We'll be able to connect them up with the gun." He relit his pipe. "That's if we find the gun."

"Then that's all you want me for."

"Yes. Oh, one more thing. Did you get any telephone calls today?"

"No." he said. "I didn't get any calls today."

"All right." Cunningham was back behind his desk. "Sorry you're a little late for work. I'd stick around town for the next few days. Just—"

"Yes, I know. Just in case."

RUTH liked Cary Grant films. When the Rialto ran one she would come on Tuesday night which was usually slow. She and Walter would sit together in the last row whenever he could get away from detail work. After he locked up they would go to the Chinese restaurant a few doors away.

They had a good Cary Grant this week and she was sitting as usual in the last row. The orchestra was nearly full even though the second feature was a lightweight B musical with few sets and an obscure comedian for the lead. They were talking in whispers because the nearest patron was only a few rows in front of them.

"And in another two weeks my training will be over," Peacock told her. "I'll go on permanent status if the chain supervisor is satisfied with me."

"He'll be satisfied with you, Walt." Ruth's voice had a placid confidence in it and her hand tightened in his.

He leaned over, breathed the soft fragrance of her hair. His arm was around her small firm back and she turned her face to him. He bent over and kissed her warm mouth.

"I've put in for the new veterans' housing, Ruth," he said. "We'll get married as soon as it comes through."

"We can stay at my house for a while," she said.

"No. We've gone all through that already. We're going on our own, we'll start off right. It won't be long, maybe not more than six months."

"Six months is a long time, Walt."

He was conscious of somebody standing beside him in the aisle and he looked up and saw the head usher. The usher leaned over and whispered to him. He got up and went back to the inner lobby. Cunningham was waiting for him with the stubby briar in his hand.

"I suppose you've got some news," Peacock said eagerly.

"Yes and no," Cunningham said.

"I wish I was through with this business."

"I wish we all were. Then maybe I could get some sleep. I had something to say to you this afternoon. I let it ride. Now I think you'd better know."

"Something bad?"

"Not good," Cunningham said. He looked down at the pipe in his hand. "We think the killer may be after you. Now we just think it, we're not sure yet."

Peacock was completely stunned for a moment. Then, as sensation returned, his legs began to feel weak and he had a sick feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"He didn't see me," he said. "He *couldn't* have seen me. He was standing in the glare of the lights."

"Maybe we're wrong, kid," Cunningham said.

"I told nobody. Not even Ruth. Nobody."

"I believe you. It's not that. It's something else. I want you to think back to last night again. The time when he fired the first shot through your windshield."

"Go ahead."

"When you went by him then, do you remember switching off your lights?"

"No. I didn't even think of it."

"Your rear number plate. He could read it as you went by."

"But maybe he didn't think of it either."

"Something else happened," Cunningham said. "Somebody phoned the Registry of Motor Vehicles this morning. He gave your number. He wanted your name and address. We'd been waiting for something like that. A tracer went through while the line was being held. It was from a drugstore pay station at the corner of Union and Bedford. When the cops got there the guy was gone. It's a busy store. There was no description."

"Then he didn't find out," Peacock ventured hopefully.

"I don't know. There are other ways. That's why I asked you if anybody called the house. Maybe you'd better check again. There might have been a call after you left for work."

They went into the tiny office. Peacock saw the posters against the wall for next week's bill. He remembered he hadn't picked the ones for the outside panels yet. The telephone was on the desk. He picked it up and dialed the house. After he spoke he put the phone down and looked over at Cunningham

"The police called at six o'clock," he said. "They wanted to know where I worked and what my hours were. She told them."

There was a silence in the room as they both looked at each other. A wave of sound came through the thin door as the audience outside guffawed at something.

"We didn't call you," Cunningham said. "We have all that information. Anyway, I've had a man on you all day. Peacock. I've taken over until you get home. There's another man waiting at the house."

"That's great," he said bitterly. "You're very kind to me."

"It may not mean a thing," Cunningham said. "There are a lot of angles in this business. Nobody knows them all."

PEACOCK had the cash box in his hand, the figures on paper. He was talking to the maintenance man about

the wattage in the marquee lights. The theater had emptied, the lights were out, and the staff had cleaned up and gone home. When he was through talking he said goodnight to the maintenance man, letting him out through the service door and bolting it after him. He hurried toward the office because Ruth was waiting for him there and he had to check the receipts before he could leave.

As he went through the deserted lobby with its dim night light, he saw Cunningham buying a coke from the automatic dispenser. He went by him and up the side aisle to the office, opened the thin, laminated wooden door.

"It won't take long, Ruth," he said. "We're getting a ride home."

And then he saw her face. It was white as chalk. She opened her mouth to say something but no words came out. He looked around beyond her and then to the corner near the safe.

There he saw him.

The man was tall and dark and not more than forty. He wore a glen plaid suit, and his hat was a dark brown felt pulled down low over a narrow forehead. He had a prominent jaw, deep creases near his eyes, and a thin cruel slash for a mouth. There was a blued steel revolver in his right hand. The hand was gloved.

The man waved the gun at Ruth. "Go over and lock the door, girlie."

She hesitated and looked wildly around. Her chin trembled. Then she got up and went over to the door. The key grated in the lock.

"There, that's better," the man said. The voice was low with a slight accent. "Now sit down again, girlie. You, Peacock, drop the box. I can always use all the lettuce that's handy."

"There's a cop outside," Peacock said, putting the box on the desk.

"I've seen him." The man grinned maliciously. "I'll take care of him. We got lots of time."

"The girl has nothing to do with it."

"She has now, Peacock. That's the breaks. I'm through giving breaks. Through last night. It took me two years to catch up with a rat called Dacey. Two years. I was sweating it out in Galveston, sending him every cent of the take. Too much bookkeeping any other way, he said. Too much bookkeeping. That's a laugh. But I had tabs on him all the way. It took a little time but I got here. I see him at the hotel. He says he doesn't have the cabbage with him. Meet me, he says, at the hotel at eight o'clock, I'll have the money for you. That's what he tells me."

"You mean he wasn't there," Peacock said.

"I know him. I didn't expect him to. I kept my eyes peeled all afternoon on the joint. Sure enough, at six o'clock he comes out and gets into a car. He's carrying a briefcase with him. I tail him. He meets the girl at a restaurant. They eat and then he comes here to the Rialto. He checks the briefcase in the checkroom. You didn't tell the cops about the briefcase, Peacock."

"What briefcase?" Then light dawned. "You mean the one checked here last night? How was I to know that was connected with all this?"

"That's right, kid, you wouldn't have occasion to know. But I knew. I told you I dogged him all the way. When the show let out I tailed him again. He didn't have the bag with him this time. Well, you saw what happened after that."

"But you killed the girl, too."

"I couldn't kill one without the other. She had a mouth, didn't she? She had eyes, didn't she? I caught up with them on that there Mile Road. I cut their car off. Then we talked for a while, cozy-like. He didn't know how mad I could get. He found out."

"What do you want with me?"

"I didn't find Dacey's claim check," the man said softly. "I don't know what he did with it. What could he have done with it, Peacock?"

"I don't know. Maybe he left it here. Maybe he stuck it under a seat with a wad of gum. Maybe he was planning on coming back after it."

"You're smart, Peacock. That's Dacey. He saw me tailing him. He figured I wouldn't knock him off unless I knew where the dough was. You see how wrong he was. Don't you make that mistake, kid. I'll want that bag. Now, Peacock."

"I'll have to go out and get it," he said. "It's in the checkroom."

"Don't get cute on me, kid. I looked in the checkroom before I came in the office. The bag was unclaimed last night, so it's got to be in that there safe." He jerked the gun at Peacock. "Open it."

PEACOCK went over to the safe, manipulated the dial. As he swung the door open, the man pushed him aside, reached in and brought the briefcase out himself.

"There should be twenty-five gees in here, Peacock. At least that."

"There may be," Peacock said. "If you can get out of here with it."

"I'll get out all right. I'm careful. I'm always sure of what I'm doing. Maybe you don't believe it. And maybe the cops thought they were smart keeping you under cover. They thought they'd get me when I phoned the Registry. But you see I was careful, kid. I figured there was another way after that. There's only so many insurance companies in town. They have the registrations of the cars they insure. It didn't take long. Especially if a guy comes in and wants to pay a claim."

"There's still a cop outside."

"That's all right, too," the man said. "The girlie will call to the cop from inside here, and when he puts his hand on the knob I'll let him have it. The door's like paper and .38 slugs will go through it like a knife through butter. After that, well, you know."

"Leave the girl out of it."

"Can't do it, kid. So far, all they have is a description that'll fit a million guys. I never had my name tagged by the cops. With you and the girl out of the way, I can get out of town. I could have gone last night but I didn't have the bag."

Ruth looked at Walt. Her eyes were dilated and her hands scrabbled on the tin cash box on top of the desk.

"All right, girlie," the man said. "Call him."

She was up on her feet. Suddenly she whirled and flung the box at the tall figure. The lid flew open and silver cascaded over him. The man was off balance as the gun flamed and Peacock, leaping through the fluttering bills, felt the hot flash singe his face as he hit the gunman waist high. The man was quick. Standing there with feet outspread, he twisted. The gun barrel raked Peacock's scalp.

He went down on his knees and fell forward, and the room began to swim in front of him.

There were three sharp reports. Peacock looked through the haze and saw the man's plaid legs stiffen and then buckle.

The shoes slid along the linoleum as he crashed to the floor.

Walter Peacock got up on his hands and knees, shook his head to clear it and then saw Cunningham framed in the open door.

In his hand was a Police Positive with a thin wisp of smoke coming out of the muzzle.

Ruth was on her knees beside him.

"I'm all right," he said. "I'm all right." He shook his head again. "But I don't get it. I thought the door was locked."

She was dabbing at his scalp with her lacy handkerchief. "He wanted the door locked," she said. "But I didn't do it. I didn't really lock it. I rattled the key and made believe I turned it."

He grinned through the pain. Then he started to pick up the money on the floor, putting it back in the cash box. He wanted to make sure everything was in order before he left.

He couldn't afford to have it any other way.

A fellow had to be careful when there were only two weeks to go for his permanent status.

I don't know why I did it

OR, DEACON PALM LOOKED TOO GUILTY

The killer struck Mrs. Perry down with a chunk of concrete

A TRUE CRIME STORY BY

STACY KENT

ONE of the most cold-blooded murders ever committed, and one as carefully planned as many a detective novel, was oddly short on the No. 1 ingredient of a good fictional plot: *motive.*

The result is that an innocent man almost went to his death. He was saved by some of the cleverest police work on record, in particular the extensive use of modern, scientific crime-detection methods. Even so, two hard-fought, turbulent trials had to run their course be-

fore the killer took his well-merited seat in the electric chair.

"I don't know why I did it," he confessed to a detective posing as a fellow murderer. "I was in love with her."

It is lucky for women that most men aren't so forceful in their affections!

Files in the New York Police Department indicate that the murder was reported shortly after 7 a. m. the morning of July 2, 1937. A young mother with her head crushed had been found amid the litter of a weedy lot near the Long Island Railroad right-of-way, in the Jamaica section of Queens County. By her side, bloody but unharmed, was her two-year-old baby girl, wailing pitifully.

Captain Henry Flattery of the Fifteenth Detective District was eating breakfast when Headquarters flashed him the news. Gulping his second cup of coffee and wiping the egg off his mouth, this under-average-size, silvery-haired boss of Queens' "eyes" was on the scene in a matter of minutes. He had been preceded by Detective Hugh McEnroe of the Jamaica Squad, a big, capable young fellow who within three years was to become an acting lieutenant in command of his own precinct squad.

Resembles Routine Murder

At first it looked like a routine homicide case. The woman's dress was torn, and also a shopping-bag that lay nearby, with some baby clothes sticking out of it. Most immediate clues were a man's left low shoe, black, and a blood-stained slab of concrete, both found within an area of a few feet. Since no purse or handbag was visible, it seemed that robbery might have been the motive.

What bothered the detectives, however, was why the baby had not been harmed. Presumably the attack had occurred some time the night before, as the woman was cutting across the lot on her way home from a visit or shopping tour. Walking through the dark at such an hour, she would most likely have been carrying her little girl. But the child showed no sign of injury, not even so much as a scratch.

While efforts were being made to identify the body, men and equipment from various units of the New York Police Department began centering on that suddenly very important piece of vacant property. Radio cars were directed there. Representatives of the chief medical examiner and of the district attorney's Homicide Bureau showed up. The nearest hospital sent an ambulance surgeon to the scene. An Emergency Squad truck arrived, loaded with items such as wire-cutters and gas-masks, even a rowboat! Police photographers came and took numerous pix. And in addition, the lot swarmed with fingerprint experts, toxicologists and other technicians of the Department.

This formidable array of talent was to a large extent automatic. Just as a fire alarm in any big city elicits a quick and thundering response, so does a homicide call unleash a fast pack of hounds. This is particularly so in New York, where a murder occurs almost every day of the year. Not all are solved but the percentage would be far higher if the police didn't get on the job with the utmost dispatch.

Howard W. Neail of the medical examiner's office was able to determine that death had occurred a good many hours before, probably prior to midnight. While he was completing his gruesome task, a woman of the neighborhood suddenly screamed:

"Why, that's poor Phennie, Arthur Perry's wife! And the baby is their daughter, Shirley."

While Captain Flattery was questioning the hysterical woman, two policemen came up with a drunk. They had found him asleep in a nearby junk-yard. He said he was a night watchman of a neighborhood building and had heard moans and screams coming from the lot the previous evening, at about 10:30, while on his way to work. Suspicious, he had run to the nearest phone booth and called the police. They had told him to stay where he was until a radio car arrived.

Instead, he had gone on one block to the Bull's Head Tavern and had several drinks to quiet his nerves. The result was that he was drunk by the time he could be questioned and the cops hadn't believed his story, hence hadn't searched the lot. So a killer who might have been captured bloody-handed got away, and

the watchman went back to his drinking, made a night of it.

Careless Radio Cops

Captain Flattery didn't like this story and neither, when he heard it, did Police Commissioner Valentine. The radio car patrolmen had let drinking, even though somebody else's, interfere with their judgment, and what might have been an easy case was now going to be a hard one. But one point, though belatedly, had been established, the hour of the crime: 10:30 p.m. or thereabouts of the night before. That is, if you could believe—and Captain Flattery did—that the drunk was sober at the time and knew what he was talking about.

Photographers had now finished taking their pictures and the body was turned over, whereupon they saw they would have a lot more to take—for directly under it were a blood-caked electric iron and a number of papers. The papers, which appeared to have fallen out of the killer's pocket during the struggle, included the following:

An envelope bearing the name of one Ulysses Palm, and a Jamaica address; a postcard, ditto; an electric light bill, ditto; a letter addressed "Dear Member" and signed, "C. K. Athetan;" a receipt book, made out to Ulysses Palm, containing the names and amounts of church donations; and three photographs, showing a man in front of a car, the same man in a studio scene, and a woman.

Under Mrs. Perry's body was also found a small strip of blue broadcloth, frayed in a manner that would indicate that it had been torn from the killer's shirt by this unfortunate woman, in her last desperate struggle for life.

Lieutenant Thomas J. Feeney of the Jamaica Squad had now arrived and Captain Flattery sent him, and Detective Frederick Trumpf of the Homicide Squad, on a hurry-hunt for Ulysses Palm. He had already sent Detective McEnroe to locate Arthur Perry.

When Feeney and Trumpf got to Palm's address, which wasn't far off, they found McEnroe already on the scene, trying to get in, having learned that the Perrys had been renting a room from Palm. He had ascertained from the neighbors that Palm had a wife, Hattie, not so young or pretty as Phennie, and that he was a deacon of the Amity Baptist Church.

Since it appeared obvious that no one was at home, the detectives forced their way into the Palm apartment. There they made two startling discoveries. First, in a corridor leading to the bathroom, they came upon the mate to the black shoe found at the scene of the crime. Second, in Palm's bedroom, they located the shirt from which the piece had been torn.

These discoveries worried Lieutenant Feeney and his men more than they pleased them. It wasn't nice to see the finger of guilt pointing so plainly at a pillar of the church. They'd have to find this Deacon Palm, and quick—see what he had to say. And they'd have to find Perry. So they hastened back to Captain Flattery, made their report as calmly as they could.

This little man, with his light blue eyes and soft pink cheeks, veteran of a hundred murder cases, refused to get excited.

"Learn everything, assume nothing," he told them. "Go find Palm and Perry, and Mrs. Palm. Let them talk—and listen."

Suspects Are Grilled

While the suspects were being rounded up, Captain Flattery dug into their backgrounds. Everyone seemed to speak well of all of them. The deeper you went, the more puzzling it got.

Palm and his wife, in particular, were impeccable. Their fellow Baptists shuddered at the very thought that either could have been involved in anything so horrible. Though not so young as the Perrys, they were an ideal couple. Neither could have been carrying on an affair with anyone. The woman was a simple housewife, the man worked in a chain store in Flushing.

As for the Perrys, Arthur was twenty-two, Phennie had been just twenty. They were from Jamestown, S. C., the children of poor share-croppers, and only recently had come North to make their way. Though lacking in education, Arthur was a willing worker and had a job with a construction

firm in Jamaica. His brother-in-law, Hiram Thurman, worked for the same firm. He had a brother, William, who had temporarily taken charge of little Shirley, the baby. A sister of the murdered woman, Mrs. Rose White, lived in Brooklyn.

That was the sum of the information Captain Flattery had been able to gather up to mid-afternoon, when the suspects were located and brought to him for questioning. The Palms denied any part in the crime but were forced to admit that the papers and the shirt were his, the iron hers. Perry also denied guilt but produced a sensation when he declared that Palm had threatened to kill his wife when she refused his advances.

This threat, he said, was contained in a letter he had intercepted the morning of June 20. It was at the home of his sister, Mrs. Hiram Thurman, of Jamaica. They could verify this if they wished. They so did and ultimately got the letter, found its contents to be exactly as claimed. Meanwhile they asked Perry what he had said to his wife about the letter.

"Nothing," he replied. "I thought somebody was playing a joke on her. I didn't think Palm would send such a letter. He didn't seem that kind of a man. So I just re-sealed it and let Phennie have it."

For a week she didn't mention the letter, Perry went on. Then one day she showed it to him laughingly, likewise thinking it was a joke.

"But later we knew different," he ended.

He was reluctant to go into details but Captain Flattery and his men dragged them out of him. Palm had tried to get into Phennie's bedroom on the morning of the day she had died. He had left for work before it happened and didn't learn of it until around 7 p.m., when he stopped at the Plaza Theatre to see her before going home. Thursday was Bingo Night and Phennie had gone there early to play, as was her custom. She told him about Palm's attempt. Little Shirley was with her and she said they were going over to Brooklyn right after the show, to spend a few days with her sister, Mrs. White.

Perry was pretty sore and went home to have it out with Palm. But Palm wasn't there so he lay down and tried to cool off for a while. Then, around 9 p.m., he went over to the Plaza Theatre again, remembering that he wanted Phennie to tell Mr. White he would be over on Sunday to go fishing. This message he conveyed to her, then returned home.

Palm Denies Charges

Palm was there by now and they had quite an argument. Palm denied he had written the letter or had tried to molest Phennie. So he had quit talking to the man and gone to his room, packed some clothes and taken off for his sister's home, not wanting to stay there alone. With him he had taken the letter.

"What time was this?" Captain Flattery asked.

"I don't know just when the argument startec or when I left but it was nine-fifty-three p.m. when I snapped on the light in my room, to pack," Perry replied. "That's what my clock said, anyhow."

He added that as he left, Palm was dressing as if to go out.

This the deacon denied. Once he got home, he had remained there. And while admitting he'd had an argument with Perry, he said it couldn't have been until 11:15 p.m., since he hadn't arrived until then. They had been taking inventory at the Flushing chain store where he worked and hadn't left before 10:10 p.m. This the manager confirmed, stating that the exact time was 10:05 p.m.

Things began to look a little better for Palm—and better still when an usher at the Plaza Theatre stated that it was 9:51 p.m., when the Bingo game ended and Perry left with a woman and a child. So even if he had bid them goodnight at once and legged it home at top speed, he couldn't have got there in less than fifteen minutes, so the clock in his room couldn't have read 9:53 p.m. when he looked at it, unless it was way slow.

But soon things began to look better for Perry again, for his sister and her husband both stated that he arrived at their place at 11 p.m. and didn't go out again that night. So how could be have seen Palm at 11:15 p.m. or later? And why had it taken the deacon over an

hour to make the eight-mile trip from Flushing to Jamaica?

On the other hand, what had Perry done with himself between 9:51 p.m., when he was seen to leave the Plaza Theatre, and 11 p.m., when he was said to have arrived at his sister's place?

Captain Flattery attempted to clear up these discrepancies in time but was unable to do so. All parties stuck stubbornly to their stories. So, having wasted enough of his own time and that of his men on this angle, he sought elsewhere for a master clue that would unravel the mystery. Motive! That was what he wanted, the *why* of the thing.

Why, if Palm were guilty, had he killed Mrs. Perry? To silence a charge that would bring disgrace to him? Considering the man's position and background, it just didn't sound reasonable. Then why, if Perry were guilty, had he murdered his pretty young wife, leaving their baby daughter without a mother? Because he had tired of her? Even if the marriage hadn't taken place until shortly before little Shirley was born, as the sister claimed, still such a motive didn't make sense.

Then, for a while, Captain Flattery thought he had one that fitted. Perry carried a small joint insurance policy on himself, his wife and the baby, and had paid up a lot of back premiums just the day before the murder. But a further check disclosed that the policy named no beneficiary and Perry had waived his rights in favor of that same sister who seemed so anxious to involve him.

Flattery Weighs Evidence

So as Captain Flattery weighed these motives against the evidence, they didn't seem to weigh much. And the various parties insisted they had told the truth. Maybe they had, or were honestly mistaken. In any event, nothing more could be gained by questioning. So Flattery shrugged.

"We've gone as far as we can go," he told his men. "Now let's see what the scientific boys can do with this stuff," indicating the grim exhibits on his desk.

What they did was plenty.

The Technical Research Laboratory of the New York Police Department assigned Detectives Edward F. Fagan and John A. Stevenson to the case. College graduates and top-flight chemists, they cared not at all that no useful fingerprints had been found on the exhibits. With microscopes and spectographs, test-tubes and pipettes, they went on a scientific man-hunt.

Fagan first tackled the electric iron, the shoe and the piece of cloth, giving them the benzidine reagent test. This showed that the stains were blood. That it was human blood was proved by further tests, for grouping and typing, done by Dr. Alexander O. Gettler, chief toxicologist of the medical examiner's office, and his assistant, Dr. Harry Schwartz.

Since there was a hole in the sole of the shoe, Fagan examined the socks of Palm and Perry. A dirt spot on one of Perry's socks matched the hole. The benzidine reagent test showed a trace of blood. Drs. Gettler and Schwartz proved it was human blood. They called for a sample of the soil where the body had been found and proved that it was similar to that found on Perry's sock. They also proved that the piece of cloth from Palm's shirt had first been cut for a half-inch or so by a sharp instrument, probably a knife, then ripped to simulate having been torn out in the struggle.

"Perry did it," they told Fagan. "He did the job."

"Perry did it," Fagan told Flattery. "He's our man."

"Wait," said the little detective captain. "Learn everything, assume nothing."

Stevenson, meanwhile, had been busy with that threatening letter received by Phennie. He had selected key words and obtained fifteen specimen sheets filled with the handwriting of Palm and Perry. Palm had not written the letter, he was satisfied. But since the writing was obviously disguised, he couldn't be sure Perry had written it. So he called in Albert Osborn and Elbridge Stein, two of the most noted handwriting experts in the country. Minutely they examined the specimen sheets, and the letter.

"Perry wrote it," they told Stevenson. "He's your man."

"Perry wrote it," Stevenson told Flattery. "What are we waiting for?"

"Nothing, now." The little captain smiled.

Then he sighed, thinking no doubt how odd a thing is human nature. . . .

Jury Indicts Perry

Arthur Perry was indicted for first degree murder September 23, the Grand Jury charging:

"The defendant on or about July 1, 1937, in the County of Queens, wilfully, feloniously and of malice aforethought, struck and killed Phennie Perry with an electric iron, a piece of concrete and another or other blunt instrument or instruments, the exact nature of which is to the Grand Jury unknown."

Even so, it took two bitterly contested trials to bring this cold-blooded killer to justice.

The first trial opened November 8 and was placed in the hands of the jury November 12. Satisfied beyond a reasonable doubt that Perry had committed the murder and tried to throw suspicion to Palm by "planting" certain items under the body, they returned in six and one-half hours with a verdict of guilty as charged. But the Court of Appeals reversed the conviction on technical grounds.

The second trial opened November 14, 1938, and ran seven days. This time the jury remained out ten hours and at one time requested all forty exhibits that had been introduced as evidence. But it was not only this grim mass of material that made their task difficult.

The prosecution had sprung a surprise witness, in the person of Detective Sidney Cusbeth of the New York Police Department. He testified that, prior to the first trial, he had been placed in Perry's cell block by the District Attorney's office and told to gain the confidence of the accused by posing as Sam Jackson, wanted for murder in Georgia. This he had done with such success that Perry, he testified, had confessed, saying:

"I don't know why I did it. I was in love with her."

Perry had hotly denied this but Cusbeth, under cross-examination, had stuck to his story. And he had been permitted to step from the stand without explanation of why the D.A. had not had him testify in the first trial.

This and other evidence had no doubt caused the jury considerable difficulty. But in the end, they had returned with the same verdict as their predecessors: "Guilty as charged."

This time the Court of Appeals upheld the conviction, one justice dissenting on the grounds of reasonable doubt—and in August of 1939, still protesting his innocence, Arthur Perry was electrocuted for the murder of his wife.

Reasonable doubt there might have been, viewed from the angle of motive, for this nearly perfect crime was oddly weak in that respect. But the "scientific boys," as Captain Flattery liked to call his young technicians, were not interested in motives, merely in facts.

Deacon Ulysses Palm can thank them, and Flattery, for the added fact that Arthur Perry instead of himself sat in the Hot Seat. Had this clever "hill-billy" from South Carolina concocted his plot a generation ago, before the days of the Technical Research Laboratory, the story might have had a different ending.

●

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Eddie Sanders had to have two grand — and the only way he could get it was by turning thief!

Eddie froze as he heard a tinkling sound

The Amateur

By WILL OURSLER

HE threaded his way slowly across the darkened living room. The street lamp outside gleamed through the foliage around the house, throwing odd splotches of light on the sofa and the thick Persian rug.

You had to be the professional, he was thinking, just the way Corro had said. Eddie Sanders, professional thief. Sanders, the ex-war hero. The big guy who was always talking about owning a garage or fleet of cabs, instead of just chauffeuring for the Hocktons.

As he neared the door to the bedroom, he stopped. Strange, how much at home he felt in this house. He had come to know the place, almost as if he were part of the family.

Memory of that talk with Corro came back to him as he stood there. He'd never seen the man before until the meeting a week past. But he'd heard of him. Lots of people in town had heard of him. Corro was smooth, they said. He never made mistakes.

Slim, black-haired Corro had been leary. "Maybe you're okay, like the guys tell me. Maybe the ice is worth twenty grand. How do I know? You're an amateur. You ain't ever been in on a job before."

The small-time crook was playing big

shot. He sat there in the back room of the bar, looking up at Eddie. "Don't like getting tied in with amateurs. Guys like you louse things up."

Corro spat out the words. The funny part was that Eddie knew he was right. That was why he wanted Corro in the first place, so there wouldn't be any mistakes. Getting the cash to send Tina to the clinic out West—that was the only thing that mattered.

"I know the house like a book," Eddie plunged on. "Every detail. When they come and when they go. I've been chauffeuring for 'em for months. All you got to do is break open the little chest of drawers in the bedroom. In the box inside—"

Corro's lips had twisted. "Sure. You're scared, so you run to me. I take all the risk and we split fifty-fifty. Only if somehow you mess it up, I'm the one gets stuck."

Eddie had the answer for that. It didn't have to be fifty-fifty. "The stuff's worth twenty grand. All I need is two thousand. Two thousand bucks. The rest of it—"

Corro had listened, finally. "I'm taking the risk on account of—it's your neck as well as mine, if anything goes wrong. Only we got to be sure there ain't no mistakes."

They'd picked tonight—Thursday, Eddie's day off. On Thursdays, the Hocktons were always out. The plan had been for Eddie to turn over the door key to Corro that morning.

Only Corro had lost his nerve. Lost it at the last minute. This morning he'd thrown the key back in Eddie's lap. "The deal's no good," he said. "I'm calling it off. I ain't risking my neck for no amateurs."

EDDIE had gone back to the two-room flat. He'd seen his wife lying there in the bed. He stood looking at her and thinking how he'd never be able to save enough from what he earned to pay for the trip out to the clinic, the operation and hospital bills and all the rest.

That was when he made up his mind. He knew he'd have to lie about how he got the money, after he unloaded the stuff. Tina wouldn't understand this thing he was doing. She'd be angry and shamed. Keep life clean and straight, and you don't have to be afraid, even of death. That was how Tina talked.

But you just couldn't let your wife lie there and die.

He edged forward now, into the Hockton bedroom. No hurry. That was one good part. He'd worked for the Hocktons long enough to find out the routine of their lives, even on his day off.

Always they would go into the city on Thursdays. Hockton would drive the car in himself. His wife would go in later, by train. Always she came back on the nine-ten train in the evening and would call from the station to see if her husband were home and could come down and get her. If there were no answer she'd take a cab.

It was all right, Eddie thought. Hockton had mentioned to Eddie that he'd be playing bridge at the club tonight. He never got back from those tournaments before ten or eleven.

Eddie glanced at his wrist watch. The hands of the radium dial said a quarter to nine. He had waited until late for the cover of darkness. But there was still plenty of time.

He knelt by the chest of drawers, the screwdriver twisting in his hand as he tried to force the lock. Once he had seen her put away a bracelet in the box in this drawer and had warned her it was dangerous, keeping her jewels that way in the house.

Stoutish Mrs. Hockton had smiled and run a plump hand through her grayish hair. "Oh, I never worry about such things, Edward. You've got to trust people, you know. You've got to believe in them."

You could talk to Mrs. Hockton. You could tell her your problems. He had even told her once about Tina and how she needed a special operation, and Mrs. Hockton had said she wished she could

help, and added, "But even with us, with the expense of keeping the boys in school, and things costing the way they do . . ."

He hadn't spoken to her about it again.

He felt the lock give under the twisting screwdriver. In the darkness, he pulled open the drawer. He could feel his heart pounding as he reached inside.

It wasn't exultation, but fear. Sweating with fear, just the way Corro had said he would. "Guys who never pulled deals before get scared. They don't look at it like no professional."

He couldn't get scared. He couldn't bungle this one. His fingers closed on the box. Only a few seconds more and that jewelry would be in his hands.

But he froze the next instant, as he heard the sound. A tinkling sound there in the room. A soft tinkling on the table between the beds. The Hockton's phone was ringing.

The box in his hand dropped back into the drawer with a little thud. The tinkling came again. It seemed louder now, seemed to fill the whole room.

He knelt there motionless as it rang again, and kept on ringing insistently, over and over. At last it stopped. He glanced at his watch. Still only a quarter to nine. There should have been plenty of time.

Then he realized with a numb horror that the watch had stopped. In the nervout tension of this day, of waiting for darkness, he had forgotten to rewind it. The bungle, he thought. The fatal error. The amateur lousing up the deal.

Mrs. Hockton, of course. Mrs. Hockton, calling from the station. It must be well after nine by now. She would be on her way in the cab. In another fifteen minutes, she'd be here.

Panic began to take hold of him. The fears he had tried to bottle up were let loose, and his thoughts became wild and confused. Mrs. Hockton. Mrs. Hockton who trusted him. But who would remember how he talked about the dangers of keeping jewels there? And remember about his needing money for his wife?

Simple things. Little things he hadn't thought about before. Things that would give him away from the start. But Corro must have thought of them. That was why he had backed out.

Eddie wasn't going to take them. He wasn't going to take anything at all. He was clearing out of here while there was still time. Corro had it right. Amateurs had no business in deals like this.

There were only minutes left. Quickly with his handkerchief he rubbed fingerprints off the box and off the front of the drawer. He slammed the drawer shut and stood up. The place was silent. But the tinkling of that phone still seemed to sound in his mind. The tinkling which had drawn back his hands.

A RUSH of relief ran through him. It was like going through ordeal by fire and coming out unscathed. He hadn't stolen anything. His hands were still clean.

He'd get the money. Somehow, some other way. He wouldn't just let her die. And he wouldn't be a thief. He'd still be Eddie Sanders. Sanders, the big gun in the war, the guy with all the medals.

He was starting across the bedroom toward the door. In the darkness, he stumbled over a footstool. He regained his balance and kept on, out into the little hall, toward the living room.

He stopped suddenly, just inside the living room. There were sounds outside. It was someone at the front door. Someone putting a key into the lock.

The door was opening. There wasn't time to make the dash across to the dining room and out the back way. Eddie pressed into the shadows of the hall.

It couldn't be Mrs. Hockton. He was certain of that. There hadn't been enough time since her call for her to get out here from the station.

Step by step, a figure was moving silently into the room. As it moved forward Eddie recognized the man. In the splotches of light from the street lamp, he made out the pointed face and slen-

der build of Corro.

Eddie gasped. The double-cross. The professional double-cross. Corro must have had wax in his hand or pocket that morning and taken an impression when Eddie handed him the key. Eddie had given him all the details about the house. Corro had figured on taking the whole show himself. He hadn't guessed Eddie might have the nerve to try it alone. He didn't know about all those medals they'd pinned on Eddie during the war.

Motionless, Eddie waited, the way he used to wait in a foxhole while a Jap tried to sneak in. He waited until Corro was hardly an arm's length away.

Then he jumped, springing out of the shadows which had hidden him, grabbing for the glittery object that gleamed in Corro's right hand. The dapper crook careened backward, crashing over the coffee table.

The fight lasted only seconds. It was Eddie who broke away, leaping to his feet, crying out, "I've got your gun. I've got your gun, Corro. You just stay quiet—"

He turned on the lamp. He kept the gun on Corro, made the man sit in one of the easy chairs. "We're expecting our hostess—Mrs. Hockton. Any minute now. When she gets here, I'll have her call the cops."

The wait wasn't long. He heard noises outside and then the door opening. It was Mrs. Hockton all right. Only she wasn't alone. Two cops came in ahead of her, guns drawn.

He told them the story, spilled it out to her and the cops. He might have tried lying about how he happened to be there but it wouldn't have worked. Nothing mattered now except to get it straightened out, all of it. That was how Tina would want him to play the hand.

He got it all out. All the way from the beginning. The talks with Corro and the way Corro backed out because he wouldn't deal with any squarehead amateur.

Corro's laughter was icy. "You jerk," he was saying. "Don't even know which side you're playing on. Putting your head in a noose and pulling—just to break your own neck."

Corro laughed again. The smaller cop was making notes. Eddie looked over at Mrs. Hockton, standing there with that funny feathered hat on her head.

"Edward," she said, "I—I don't care what you planned. You didn't take anything. That's the important part—you didn't." She was looking at the policeman. "I don't want to make any complaint against Edward. I want to help him. I—"

THERE was a little pause. The taller of the two policemen nodded. "Protecting you—that's our job, lady, like I said when you stopped the prowl car about the lights being on in here. If you say he's got a right to be in here, why then—"

She smiled. "Of course, he has—he works for me. Maybe he'll even get some insurance reward—for capturing a thief. Anyway, we'll get money for her, Edward, somehow. If only, instead of this, you'd told me how desperate it was, life or death—"

After a silence, he said, "If it hadn't been for your phone call, I'd have taken the jewelry. It was your call stopped me, Mrs. Hockton."

She was plainly puzzled. "Edward, I don't understand that part. I knew my husband was at the club tonight. So I came straight out from the station. I didn't make a phone call this time."

The tall cop stared at Eddie. "That call meant a lot, didn't it, Sanders. It kept you from being a thief. And it's the reason Corro here got snagged up."

"I don't get it," Eddie said. "If she didn't make the call, then who—"

"Mr. Corro," the cop said with elaborate sarcasm, "doesn't take chances like some punk amateur. He figures the angles. Like, for instance, calling this house from the drug store around the corner, just to make sure nobody was home." He grinned. "Pays off sometimes—being professional like that."

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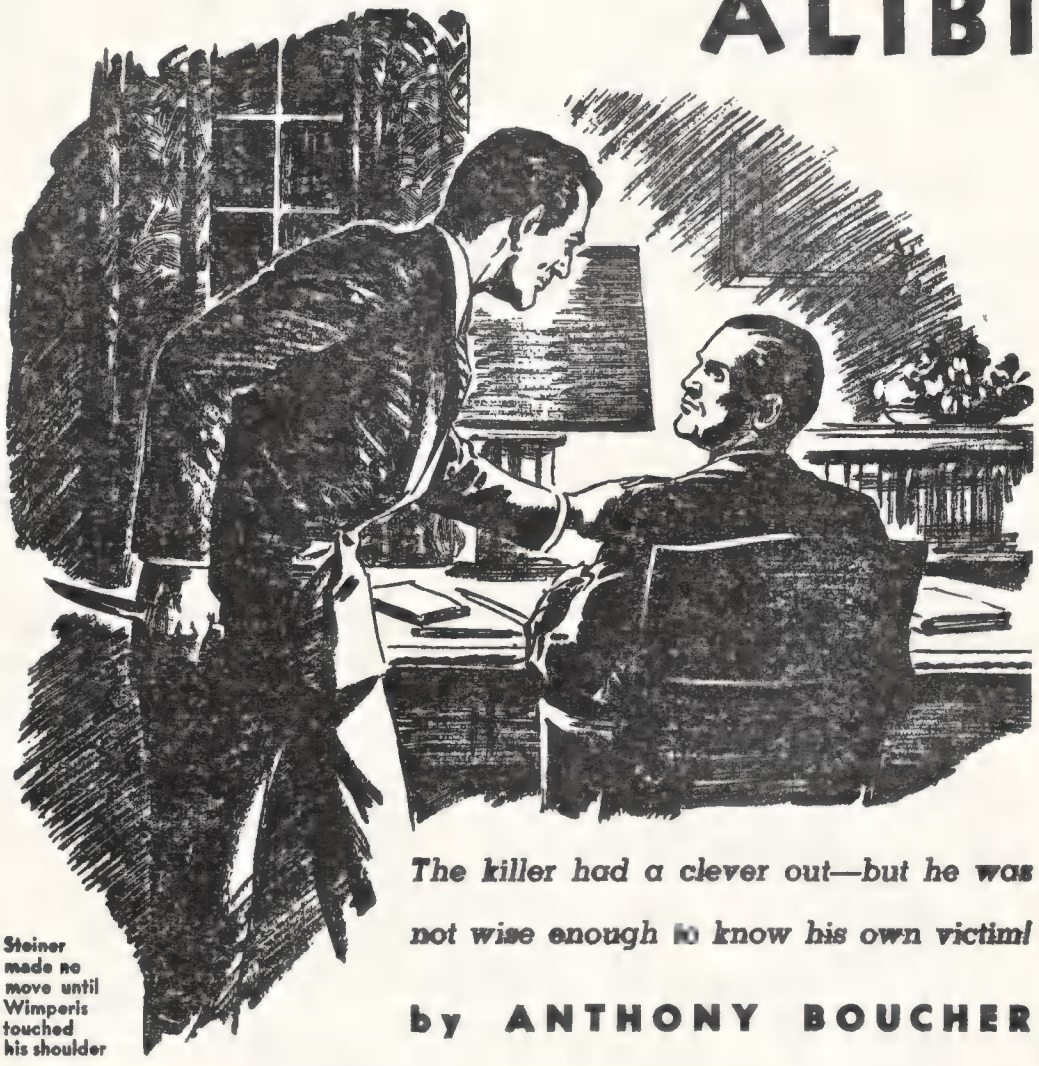

Steiner made no move until Wimperis touched his shoulder

The killer had a clever out—but he was not wise enough to know his own victim!

by ANTHONY BOUCHER

DOOR OPEN. Those were the first words of the manuscript reposing in Wimperis' safe.

And the door was open. That was Steiner for you. "Drop in any time. If I don't hear you ring, come in and pour yourself a drink."

Attractive trait—and doubly attractive in a murder victim.

Enter 7:15 were the next words and Wimperis obeyed them precisely. He walked quietly down the dark hall toward the thin low line of light issuing from under the study door. He used his

handkerchief to turn the knob.

Sidney Steiner sat at his desk as the manuscript had anticipated, back to the door. Wimperis stepped forward. His heel caught in the scatter-rug. For a moment he was completely off balance. He righted himself only with a, to him, thunderous clatter of soles and heels.

This noise had not been in the manuscript. But the man at the desk did not stir. Humped in concentration over his sheets of foolscap, he made no move until Wimperis stood directly behind him and touched him on the shoulder. Then he turned, smiling, lifting his chin and exposing the line of his throat.

Knife in neck, the manuscript read. *Hold body away from spurt of blood.*

* * * * *

From the select residential district of Piedmont to the heights of the Berkeley hills is about a half hour's drive—which gave Hugh Wimperis more than time enough to think over the manuscript and its causes, particularly since his cooling companion, a scarf wrapped loosely around his gaping throat, showed no inclination toward conversational give-and-take.

The causes—did they go back to law school when Wimperis, with background and position, had met Steiner, with nothing but drive and ability? To the founding of the firm of Wimperis & Steiner, when the senior partner had brought in the profitable clients and the junior partner had made it worth their while to stay? Or to some point in the following ten years as the seniority had subtly shifted and Wimperis had found himself a decorative figurehead, smiled upon by his own clerks?

What does it mean in these degenerate days to come of a fine old family, to boast pure American blood? They move in on you. They take over from you. And when you try to take back a little of your own . . .

Sidney Steiner's face had been twisted, half from the pain of his sinus trouble, half from a deeper pain. "All right, you started the firm. I won't argue, Hugh. I won't argue about who's kept it going.

"But partnership funds aren't private playthings. When I get back from Reno I'm calling in a C.P.A. Then, when the accounts are straight, we can talk about dissolving the partnership."

Hugh Wimperis had tried then to say what he felt, what he had given Steiner out of his heritage that no money could pay for, how only a crass and commonplace mind could see anything approaching embezzlement in his actions.

But Steiner seemed to find it hard to listen. He groaned with the pain of his sinusitis and muttered, "I shouldn't fly. My doctor keeps saying it. But I'm due back in court here."

IT was then that Hugh Wimperis began to ask precise questions about his timetable, the answers to which became the basis of the manuscript.

The manuscript was complete and detailed, a perfect guide-plan to murder. When Wimperis had memorized it he crumpled it and raised his arm to aim at the fireplace. Then he lowered his arm and smoothed out the paper. He could see Steiner's half-smile on reading his briefs. He could recall the amused tone of the appellate court's decision against him in the Norbert case.

He folded this one perfect product neatly and placed it in his safe. It would make reassuring rereading.

* * * * *

Now he was on top of the hills, and the lights of the East Bay and of the bridge end of San Francisco shimmered below him like a magic carpet that could carry him far beyond the power of any Superior Court jury in *State v. Wimperis.*

Find a lookout spot devoid of parked neckers, the manuscript read. This took a little time. Then, still obeying his memory, he removed the forever silent Steiner from the car and propped his body behind a tree, well off the road.

It was cold up here in the hills. *Exact time of death will be impossible to establish*, said the manuscript.

The night was clear, the traffic was light; but he drove home to Piedmont with extreme caution. The slightest traffic infringement, at this point, could lead to the gas chamber.

* * * * *

The door was still open. Smiling, Wimperis returned to the study. Now came the key point.

Using that facility of vocal imitation which had earned rebukes from so many judges but had swayed more than one theatrically impressionable jury, he would assume Steiner's brusque sinus-pinched voice and call their chief clerk at his home.

That would establish Steiner as alive at (he consulted his watch—it jibed exactly with the manuscript) precisely 8:25. Since the body had been transported a half hour away, the murderer could not have returned to Piedmont until 9:30. And Wimperis would have a perfect alibi from 8:30 on.

He was extending his hand toward the phone when it rang.

He hesitated for only a moment. Then he picked up the phone, his vocal chords already shaping the sounds of Steiner. A call coming in like this by chance might be even better than the plan of the manuscript.

"Hello!" a hearty voice boomed. "Is this Sidney Steiner?"

"Speaking," said the late Mr. Steiner's surviving partner.

"You're a lucky man, Mr. Steiner," the voice rejoiced. "This is *Take It Away!*, that grand and glorious program of fun, frolic and profit."

Wimperis was speechless at the pure magnificence of this accident. Here was his opportunity to establish the living existence of Sidney Steiner at 8:26, PST, before a transcontinental audience of heaven knew how many millions. Here was—he all but audibly gasped at

(Continued on page 142)

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Reviews in Brief

THE SILVER FOREST by Ben Ames Williams

It was early winter when Warren Pring brought six guests to his Maine woods hunting lodge. Everyone was prepared for a gay time—and then a three-day blizzard cut them off completely from the outside world. Slowly, the isolation and too-close intimacy worked a horrible psychological change in these men and women. Tempers drew fine and minor irritations became deadly affronts.

Bill Wardle was one guest who did little to help the situation. Carlotta Pring said, "Every time he touches me I feel as though a spider had dropped on me." Earlier that day her husband, Warren, had come close to choking Wardle, and there were others among the guests who reacted in the same way to the fat man's calculated cruelties. Wardle had a striking capacity for making enemies. And he liked to take liberties with other men's wives.

Late one night the breaking point was reached. Wardle, who had finally gone too far, was found shot dead. And with the discovery of the crime came an onrush of terror. For those who remained in the lodge realized they were marooned with a killer.

●

TALES OF CHINATOWN by Sax Rohmer

The nineteen-year-old girl was beautiful —but dead. Minutes after visiting the London apartment of Malcolm Knox, on the trail of a fabulous diamond, she was found murdered in a taxicab on the Strand. And Knox found himself repeatedly in danger of death from a mysterious opponent he neither knew nor could identify.

Thus, swiftly and exotically toward its bizarre climax, moves "The Pigtail of Hi Wing Ho," one of ten magnificently stirring and pagan stories that make this one of the finest volumes composed by the creator of the fabulous Dr. Fu Manchu. Anything could happen in prewar Limehouse, where the subtle and deadly intrigues of the Orient were often more than a match for the trained detective minds of New Scotland Yard.

In TALES OF CHINATOWN, virtually everything does happen—everything that is eerie, erotic and spine-tingling—in a collection that reveals Mr. Rohmer at his story-weaving best. Baffling mysteries whose swiftness is that of the West, but whose intricate perfection is that of finely-carved Oriental jade.

●

THE PINK UMBRELLA MURDER by Frances Crane

Pat and Jean Abbott were honeymooning in New York when they met some old friends of Pat's. One of them was Louis Bland, one of the more unpleasant characters out of Pat's bachelor past. Trouble

started when Pat, to kid Jean along in the murderous mood Bland had put her in, suggested that they use poison. That it was a good way to commit an undetected murder. A cop heard the "threat".

He remembered it, but not as a gag, when Bland's supremely nosy housekeeper took a header out of the window and police decided her death was no accident. Thus the Abbotts found themselves involved in murder, an unsavory murder linked with scandal and distorted love.

Jean found herself out of her depth. Meanwhile the killer, having once tasted the wine of death, wanted more—as Jean learned the night she sneaked into Bland's home, looking for Pat, and found herself alone in the darkness with the murderer. But husband Pat, who is at home anywhere, is the man who puts his finger on a surprise killer in a surprise climax.

●

THE ILLUSTRIOUS CORPSE by Tiffany Thayer

Ray Fitzgerald was an amateur playing at being a sleuth in the strange murder of Frank Daniels. Or was it murder? Was Daniels dead or alive? Even the killer didn't know for sure.

But Ray Fitzgerald knew he himself was close to death that time a throttling arm closed under his chin. Ray struggled to free himself of that suffocating hold. His breathing pounded like surf in his ears. Desperately he kicked backward at the shin of his assailant. There was an anguished cry. The arm under his chin loosened. He whirled, swung a savage blow at his attacker's face. This was for keeps. No one knew it better than Ray.

Everyone in the Frank Daniels case was playing for keeps, including the killer, the police—and the unknown parties who had stolen an illustrious corpse from a burial vault. But they all reckoned without the corpse that walked away from the Chandler funeral parlor—an establishment plagued by two dead men who could not be recognized by their mutilated faces. This is a real chiller-diller that will keep you guessing until the last shot is fired.

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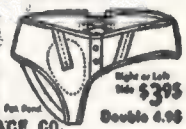

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TRANSCONTINENTAL ALIBI

(Continued from page 139)

the thought—the greatest mass alibi ever created in the history of murder.

THE hearty voice was anything but speechless. "I know you're startled, Mr. Steiner. I know it takes time to get used to the idea of a chance at winning a fully stocked Texas cattle ranch, a complete new outfit for your wife individually designed by Mainbocher and other prizes too numerous—or should I, ha ha ha, say humorous?—to mention. But tell us first of all Mr. Steiner, of Piedmont, California, who and who went up a what to fetch a pail of what?"

A sinus-afflicted lawyer replied brusquely:

"Jack and Jill went up a hill to fetch a pail of water."

"Right!" the voice cried in astonished delight and there was a distant but nonetheless ear-shattering burst of applause. "And now for the question that puts your heart's desire right in the heart of Texas.

"For eight weeks now you've heard The Man in the Iron Mask knock his head against our microphone. For eight weeks now you've heard our clues as to his identity. Now tell us, Mr. Steiner of Piedmont, California—say, how's the oranges out there, Mr. Steiner—now tell us: Who *is* The Man in the Iron Mask?"

Hugh Wimperis had never listened to *Take It Away!* in his life, but he had read that evening a columnist's guess as to The Man's identity. He repeated the guess in Steiner's tones and the hearty voice and the distant applauders went wild with glee.

But their glee was nothing to the glow which still surrounded Wimperis as he entered his own house two blocks away.

What man in all criminal history had ever boasted an alibi with millions of witnesses?

The party *(Party to start at 8:00. Late*

office work as excuse for delayed appearance) was in full swing.

As Wimperis made his excuses he decided to venture on a further unwritten touch.

"Funny thing," he smiled. "While I was driving out I was listening to *Take It Away!* on the car radio. And do you know who finally identified The Man in the Iron Mask?"

SEVERAL voices said, "Sir," and "I knew," and, "Steiner," and, "We had it on here. But there was something wrong in the tone."

It was Dr. Murdock who clarified the wrongness. "I heard it," he said. "And I don't believe it. Just confirms my opinion there's something phony about these give-away shows. Examined Steiner myself late this afternoon. Always told him he should never fly with that sinus condition. Deaf as a post. Couldn't possibly have answered those questions."

Wimperis recalled the scatter-rug and the unheard clatter. He saw his time schedule destroyed, saw his alibi turn over and present its lethal reverse, saw his unique millions of witnesses turned into witnesses for a uniquely blessed prosecution, heard the attorney for the State (probably that damned upstart Giorgioni) asking, "Isn't it true that Mr. Wimperis had a singular gift for imitating voices?"

"You'll excuse me a minute?" he said politely and went upstairs.

He took the manuscript from the safe and the automatic from the drawer. There was one advantage to the manuscript after all. It saved him the trouble of composing an explanatory suicide note.

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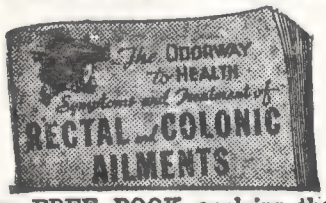

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GOOD CRIMES are COMING

(Continued from page 9)

has ever graced the pages of this magazine. It's definitely up to the high standard Fredric Brown has set with his other great yarns in the past. MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE is proud to bring it to you!

FROM OUR READERS

IF the letters that follow prove nothing else, they at least demonstrate that one man's meat is another's fatal apple. With your kind permission, we offer these in evidence:

Dear Editor: We like Fredric Brown's stories as well—especially the one called THE DEAD RINGER. You may be sure we'll read any of your magazines with his name in the index. I, for one, found his story, THE DEAD RINGER, not only educational—but as darn clever. It haunts me even now. I am a writer of confession stories and was spellbound to the end—and very appreciative of his wonderful phrases and easy style. Your magazine is now in the hands of a fifth reader. She said, "I get mad when anyone comes around when I'm reading his stuff."—*Theresa Wilkinson, 3421 21st Ave., Sacramento, Calif.*

Dear Editor: Much as I like Fredric Brown, I was disappointed with his DEAD RINGER. His stories are usually different, being terror-packed or full of suspense. This yarn, however, was very dull reading. For a change, can't we do away with some of these hard-boiled sleuths? Let's have a spine-chiller. Please one—just one!—*Milton Papayianis, Barstow, Calif.*

Dear Editor: I am an old bird, living by myself, and having existed for 79 years, put in 9 hours of labor reading that yarn THE QUEEN AND THE CORPSE, by Max Murray. I also lost my supper because I am my own chef and did not have time to cook it. I laughed till I cried and my ribs were sore, but leave it I would not. I cursed it, for its banalities, I criticised it for its impossibilities, but: I bought it to read and amuse myself and it sure did that. I expect to be a CONSTANT READER—if

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the flavor holds, and I am an omniverous animal. May even be foolish enough to give you a year's sub. I wish to extend my congratulations to Mr. Murray for his ability to run his imagination to the grass roots.—*H. G. Dodge, 27 N. Mulberry St., Lancaster, Pa.*

Dear Editor: This letter is something I should do more often, but it's one of those things that you intend to do but never get around to. Anyway, it's by way of being a letter of appreciation for putting out one of the best and most readable magazines it has been my good fortune to discover. I'm a peaceable guy normally and a rabid mystery fan. Being peaceable, I naturally like my detective heroes as rough and tough as possible and their gals lush and luscious. So, the other day while browsing at my favorite newsstand, I spotted your magazine and when I saw your list of authors, including THE Fredric Brown, I wondered how long I'd been missing this. I'd like to say that I'm a particular aficionado of Fredric Brown's and I've read everything of his that I can find in print. One small criticism I had (the carping, puristic element in my soul has to be heard, too!) In Brown's THE DEADLY WEEKEND he repeatedly states that the gal in question was wearing a strapless evening gown, but your cover artist put straps on it a foot wide! Tsk! Tsk!—*Baun Jordan, Box 1045, Watsonville, Calif.*

Dear Editor: By chance I picked up your summer issue. The finest stories I have ever read of its kind—logical, probable, real mysteries—and no writers who verge on the amateur when they have to fill in with almost risque, suggestive remarks. Your stories are forceful without having to indulge in snide innuendoes.—*Mrs. M. P. Kemerer, Kernville, Calif.*

No, you can't please everybody, friends, but we are proud of our batting average and hope to keep it high—and at least keep things interesting. Thanks for all your letters, and please keep pitching 'em. Both bouquets and beanballs are equally welcome. Please address all communications to The Editor, MYSTERY BOOK MAGAZINE, Best Publications, Inc., 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y. Thanks again, and so long!

—THE EDITOR.

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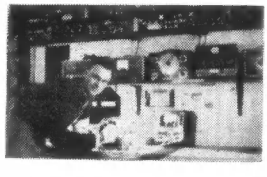

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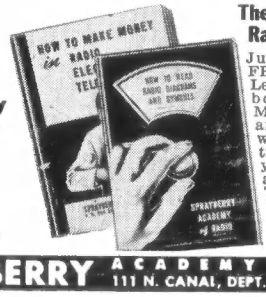

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